

Study finds drinking may ease fibromyalgia pain, but doctors wary

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U.S. specialists say alcohol is the wrong approach.

(HealthDay)—Moderate to heavy drinking might cut the likelihood of disability for people with chronic widespread pain such as that related to fibromyalgia, new Scottish research suggests.

But U.S. [pain](#) specialists say consuming alcohol is the wrong approach to coping with disabling pain.

"It's an odd way to suggest that [chronic pain](#) be treated," said Dr. Lynn Webster, president of the American Academy of Pain Medicine, who wasn't involved in the research.

"I can't imagine that any physician will suggest alcohol as a therapy," he added. "The more you drink, the more you need to get the same effects."

About 2 percent of Americans suffer from fibromyalgia, a mysterious disease characterized by the presence of chronic, widespread pain, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Women outnumber men seven to one in their prevalence of the disorder, whose symptoms also include stiffness, [sleep disturbances](#) and thinking and memory problems.

Chronic widespread pain can also be triggered by other conditions, Webster noted, including [complex regional pain syndrome](#) and [arthritic conditions](#).

The study—published recently in the journal *Arthritis Care & Research*—was conducted by Professor Gary Macfarlane and Marcus Beasley of the University of Aberdeen's Institute of Applied Health Sciences School of Medicine and Dentistry in Scotland.

The researchers surveyed more than 2,200 adults in the United Kingdom—57 percent of them women—who suffered from chronic widespread pain. They found that disability stemming from pain was strongly linked to alcohol consumption, with moderate to heavy drinkers experiencing less disability.

The scientists found that people drinking 21 to 35 units of alcohol a week were 67 percent less likely than those who never drink to experience disability.

Those amounts translate roughly into 15 to 20 beers or 10 to 15 glasses of wine per week by American standards, U.S. physicians said, constituting moderate to [heavy drinking](#).

Alcohol can ease pain by stimulating the brain's limbic system, which regulates feelings of pleasure and pain. But "chronic drinking can make pain worse, and withdrawal from chronic alcohol use often increases

pain sensitivity," said Dr. Alan Manevitz, a clinical psychiatrist at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City.

Manevitz, who subspecializes in pain disorders such as fibromyalgia, noted that the new study does not prove a cause-and-effect relationship between increased alcohol use and lower disability from pain, only an association between the two.

He said it was "inexplicable" that the study also showed that very heavy drinkers—those consuming more than 35 units of alcohol weekly—experienced similar levels of disabling pain as never-drinkers.

Webster said the amount of alcohol needed to produce lower pain-related disability varies by individual.

"In someone who doesn't drink, even half a glass of wine will stimulate the limbic system, making them dizzy," he said. "That effect will trump, then, the pain from fibromyalgia. They're replacing that sensory input for pain."

Manevitz agreed with the study authors that the study should not be interpreted to mean that [alcohol](#) has a therapeutic benefit for pain. "It's a poor self-medication and it ultimately causes further deterioration in patients with pain," he said.

The Scottish researchers could not be reached for comment, but in the study they note that a significant number of participants were drinking more than the recommended limit.

Webster suggested that people experiencing [fibromyalgia](#) or other forms of [chronic widespread pain](#) "create some alternate stimulation" that produces feelings of well-being, such as exercise, mindfulness or even watching a movie.

"Something that makes you feel good and stimulates the limbic system in a safe way would be an alternate experience," he said.

More information: The U.S. National Fibromyalgia and Chronic Pain Association has more about [fibromyalgia symptoms](#).

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