

Young adults' problem drinking may have lasting health effects

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Young adults with symptoms of alcohol dependence may see health effects late in life—even decades after conquering their problem drinking, according to a study in the November 2016 issue of the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*.

Researchers found that, of 664 U.S. male veterans, those who had symptoms of [alcohol dependence](#) for at least five years in young adulthood generally had poorer physical and mental health by the time they were in their 60s.

And that was true even if they'd gotten control over their [drinking problems](#) by the age of 30.

The findings are surprising, said lead researcher Randy Haber, Ph.D., of the Palo Alto Veterans Affairs Health Care System, in Menlo Park, Calif.

It's clear that people's lives improve when alcohol dependence goes into remission, Haber pointed out, but it is not clear whether there are hidden consequences that remain after [heavy drinking](#) has ceased. For instance, evidence shows that both brain and body are affected by [excessive drinking](#), but we don't know how long these effects last.

The new findings suggest that years of alcohol dependence during young adulthood result in silent but "permanent" injuries that, in later life, appear to result in serious health problems, according to Haber.

The findings are based on men taking part in a larger study of Vietnam-era veterans. Haber's team focused on 368 men who did not report any symptoms of alcohol dependence at any point in adulthood, 221 who had at least three symptoms of dependence in young adulthood and middle-age and 75 who had symptoms in [early adulthood](#) but not after the age of 30. Overall, the study found that men who had alcohol dependence symptoms for at least five years in early adulthood scored lower on standard measures of both physical and mental health once they'd reached their 60s.

For example, those with alcohol dependence in [young adulthood](#) had, on average, three medical conditions in later life whereas those without this history reported two. In addition, their scores on a depression scale were about twice as high. Most important, these effects were seen even among men who'd been free of dependence symptoms for several decades.

The reasons are unclear. But, Haber said, other studies have shown that chronic drinking may injure parts of the brain involved in emotional regulation, self-control and decision making. It's possible, he noted, that years of [alcohol exposure](#) in early adulthood could have lasting effects on those brain areas.

Still, Haber stressed that this study is reporting "averages" and not what any one person is destined for.

He said that people who not only quit problem drinking but also turn their lifestyle around—eating well, not smoking and just generally "taking care of themselves"—will likely see health benefits that last into late life.

Plus, he said, there is a "whole body of literature" showing that when people with alcohol dependence go into recovery, their lives improve in almost every area.

"If you have entered (alcohol dependence) recovery, keep going," Haber said. "Live your life to its fullest."

More information: Haber, J. R., Harris-Olenak, B., Burroughs, T., & Jacob, T. (November 2016). Residual effects: Young adult diagnostic drinking predicts late-life health outcomes. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 77(6), 859-867. [DOI: 10.15288/jsad.2016.77.859](https://doi.org/10.15288/jsad.2016.77.859)

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