

Baby boomers on a bender: Emerging trends in alcohol binge and use disorders among older adults

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Credit: New York University

Alcohol is the most commonly used psychoactive substance among older adults, and this group can have unique risks associated with alcohol consumption—in even lower amounts—compared to younger persons.

"Older adults have particular vulnerabilities to [alcohol](#) due to physiological changes during aging, including increasing chronic disease burden and medication use," said Benjamin Han, MD, MPH, a geriatrician and [health](#) services researcher at the Center for Drug Use and HIV Research (CDUHR) and in the Division of Geriatric Medicine and Palliative Care at NYU Langone Medical Center (NYU Langone). "However, no recent studies have estimated trends in alcohol use, including binge alcohol use and alcohol use disorders among [older adults](#)."

To address the lack of research, Dr. Han and his team examined data from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (years 2005 to 2014) in a paper published in the journal *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*. Trends of self-reported past-month binge alcohol use and [alcohol use disorder](#) were examined among adults age 50 and older. The researchers found significant increases in past-year alcohol use, past-month alcohol use, past-month binge drinking, and alcohol use disorders. The paper, "Demographic trends of binge alcohol use and alcohol use disorders among older adults in the United States, 2005-2014." Published on-line 12 December 2016.

Results also suggest that while men had a higher prevalence of binge alcohol use and alcohol use disorders than women, binge alcohol use and alcohol use disorder increased among women in this nationally representative sample.

"As females age, they tend to experience a larger impact of physiological changes in lean body mass compared to men," commented Dr. Han. "Thus, they may experience the adverse effects associated with

consuming alcohol even in lower amounts."

"The increase in binge drinking among older women is particularly alarming" said Dr. Palamar, PhD, MPH, a CDUHR affiliated researcher and an assistant professor of Population Health at NYU Langone. "Both men and women are at risk for getting themselves into risky sexual situations while drinking, but women are at particularly high risk." Dr. Palamar also stated that "heavy drinking can not only have unintended health consequences, but it can also lead to socially embarrassing or regretful behavior."

For the researchers, the results also raise public health concerns, given the significant increases in binge alcohol use among older adults who reported "fair/poor" health and/or multiple chronic conditions. This population is particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of alcohol as it can impact chronic disease management or increase the risk of injury.

"Health care providers need to be made aware of this increasing trend of unhealthy alcohol use, particularly among older females, and ensure that screening for unhealthy alcohol use is part of regular medical care for this population" said Dr. Han.

More information: Benjamin H. Han et al, Demographic trends of binge alcohol use and alcohol use disorders among older adults in the United States, 2005–2014, *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2016.11.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2016.11.003)

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