

The benefits of social drinking

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New research shows that moderate alcohol consumption may be linked to improved wellbeing, thanks to the improved social interaction associated with having a drink with friends at a local pub.

While most studies warn of the health risks of [alcohol consumption](#), researchers at the University of Oxford have looked at whether having a drink may play a role in improving [social cohesion](#), given its long

association with human social activities.

Combining data from three separate studies - a questionnaire-based study of pub clientele, observing conversational behaviour in pubs, and a national survey by the Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA) – the researchers looked at whether the frequency of alcohol consumption or the type of venue affected peoples' social experiences and wellbeing.

They found that people who have a 'local' that they visit regularly tend to feel more socially engaged and contented, and are more likely to trust other members of their community. They also observed that those without a local pub had significantly smaller social networks and felt less engaged with, and trusting of, their local communities.

The study also showed that those who drank at local pubs tended to socialise in smaller groups, which encouraged whole-group conversation, while those drinking in city-centre bars tended to be in much larger groups, and participated much less in group conversation.

Professor Robin Dunbar of the University of Oxford's Experimental Psychology department, said: 'This study showed that frequenting a local pub can directly affect peoples' social network size and how engaged they are with their local community, which in turn can affect how satisfied they feel in life.

'Our social networks provide us with the single most important buffer against mental and physical illness. While pubs traditionally have a role as a place for community socialising, alcohol's role appears to be in triggering the endorphin system, which promotes social bonding. Like other complex bonding systems such as dancing, singing and storytelling, it has often been adopted by large social communities as a ritual associated with bonding.'

Colin Valentine, CAMRA's National Chairman, said: 'Personal wellbeing and happiness have a massive impact not only on individual lives, but on communities as a whole. It will be of no surprise to CAMRA members that pubs play such a pivotal role in a person's wellbeing, but it is fantastic news to hear that this wisdom has now been confirmed by research.'

'Pubs play a unique role in offering a social environment to enjoy a drink with friends in a responsible, supervised community setting. For this reason, we all need to do what we can to ensure that everyone has a 'local' near to where they live or work - the first step to which is to strengthen planning protection for pubs to stem the 21 pubs closing across this country each week.'

More information: R. I. M. Dunbar et al. Functional Benefits of (Modest) Alcohol Consumption, *Adaptive Human Behavior and Physiology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1007/s40750-016-0058-4](https://doi.org/10.1007/s40750-016-0058-4)

Provided by University of Oxford

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