

Mental health problems combined with high alcohol intake increase risk of premature death

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The risk of premature death doubles if you have mental health problems and drink more than the equivalent of two units per day, on average.

This is shown in a study conducted by the Norwegian Institute of Public Health.

"Our conclusion is that high alcohol consumption and mental [health](#) problems are more strongly linked to negative [health outcomes](#) when they occur together, than individually," says researcher Eirik Degerud.

A group of researchers from the Norwegian Institute of Public Health, the University of Oslo and the University of Bristol quantified the chance of dying prematurely among people who reported different combination levels of alcohol use and mental health problems.

The researchers studied around 200,000 Norwegians in their forties using health surveys and data from the Cause of Death Registry. They examined the mortality of these individuals over two decades.

During this period, about 20,000 of the 200,000 participants died, or about 10 percent. Among the 400 people who reported mental health problems combined with high alcohol intake, around 100 people died, more than 20 percent. Therefore, the chances of dying were twice as high in this group compared to the expected mortality rate in the whole group.

Degerud explains that they measured mental health problems through seven questions about how the participants felt over the past 14 days, such as whether they had been mainly sad or depressed. High alcohol consumption was defined as drinking more than 24 grams of alcohol per day on average, which is equivalent to two units of alcohol.

Consider abstaining from alcohol

Degerud explains that research literature shows a clear connection between mental health problems and alcohol use. Some studies suggest

that mental health problems can lead to higher alcohol intake, often referred to as the "self-medication theory". Other studies suggest that higher alcohol intake can cause, or worsen, mental health problems.

"Alcohol use and mental health problems contribute to many, and sometimes the same, [negative health consequences](#). The consequences for health in both the short and long term can be greater if someone is exposed to both. This is what we found in our study," says Degerud.

He says that they do not know exactly what causes increased mortality because they only measured alcohol intake and mental health problems at a [single point](#) in the lives of the participants. One possible explanation is that high alcohol consumption and mental health problems combined can lead to a negative development over time.

This negative development may involve a higher or more extreme intake of alcohol, more serious mental health problems, increased use of psychoactive drugs and other intoxicants, a less protective social and socioeconomic environment, and a reduced ability for self-care.

Degerud adds that several countries advise people with [mental health problems](#) to consider abstaining from [alcohol](#). The findings of the study support this advice.

More information: Eirik Degerud et al. Association of coincident self-reported mental health problems and alcohol intake with all-cause and cardiovascular disease mortality: A Norwegian pooled population analysis, *PLOS Medicine* (2020). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pmed.1003030](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1003030)

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