

Couples with similar drinking habits may live longer

March 27 2024, by Jon Meerdink



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The couple that drinks together might live longer together, too, says a University of Michigan researcher.

In a recent study [published](#) in *The Gerontologist*, Kira Birditt, research professor at the U-M Institute for Social Research's Survey Research Center, found that couples who are concordant in their [drinking behavior](#) (that is, both members drink alcohol) tend to live longer.

She says a theory in alcohol literature called "the drinking partnership," where couples who have similar patterns of alcohol use tend to have better marital outcomes (such as less conflict and longer marriages), was the inspiration behind the study.

Although a great deal of research has examined the implications of couples' drinking patterns for marital outcomes, the implications for [health](#) are less clear. Behaviors that are good for marriage are not necessarily good for health, Birditt says.

"The purpose of this study was to look at alcohol use in couples in the Health and Retirement Study and the implications for mortality," she said. "And we found, interestingly, that couples in which both indicated drinking alcohol in the last three months lived longer than the other couples that either both indicated not drinking or had discordant drinking patterns in which one drank and the other did not."

And while it may sound like that's a recommendation to drink more with your spouse, Birditt cautions against that reading.

The study specifically looked at drinking patterns and defined "drinking" very broadly, examining whether or not a participant had had a drink within the last three months. However, it may suggest the importance of remembering how spouses can impact each other's health. Drinking concordance among couples may be a reflection of compatibility among partners in their lifestyles, intimacy and relationship satisfaction.

"We've also found in other studies that couples who drink together tend

to have better relationship quality, and it might be because it increases intimacy," Birditt said.

That impact might merit further study. Birditt would like to explore further questions related to couples' alcohol consumption and how it affects their relationship.

"We don't know why both partners drinking is associated with better survival. I think using the other techniques that we use in our studies in terms of the daily experiences and ecological momentary assessment questionnaires could really get at that to understand, for example, focusing on concordant drinking couples," she said. "What are their daily lives like? Are they drinking together? What are they doing when they are drinking?"

"There is also little information about the daily interpersonal processes that account for these links. Future research should assess the implications of couple drinking patterns for daily marital quality, and daily physical health outcomes."

The Health and Retirement study is a nationally representative study of adults aged 50 and older in the United States. It includes couples who are interviewed every two years. Participants included 4,656 married/cohabiting different-sex [couples](#) (9,312 individuals) who completed at least three waves of the HRS from 1996 to 2016.

More information: Kira S Birditt et al, Alcohol Use and Mortality Among Older Couples in the United States: Evidence of Individual and Partner Effects, *The Gerontologist* (2023). [DOI: 10.1093/geront/gnad101](https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnad101)

Provided by University of Michigan

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