

Veterans are at higher risk of alcohol abuse relapse due to smoking

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In a new study published in *Frontiers*, Dr Timothy Durazzo and colleagues from the San Francisco VA Medical Center and University of California, San Francisco, expand upon their decade of research showing that smoking while kicking the alcohol habit impairs memory, learning and other cognitive skills—ultimately making it more difficult to weather the long storm of sobriety.

Cigarettes, substance abuse and the military

"Given our strong and consistent research findings in both Veterans and civilians on the ill-effects of chronic [smoking](#), we truly hope to see [smoking cessation](#) programs become increasingly available for our current active-duty war fighters," says Dr. Durazzo

Active duty US soldiers smoke at around a 10% higher rate than the [civilian population](#). And after serving their country in the military, they statistically run higher risks of alcohol and substance abuse. In 2007, over 375,000 VA patients had a substance use disorder diagnosis and nearly 500,000 additional patients had a [nicotine dependence](#). According to Dr. Durazzo, alcohol and cigarettes have a greater negative effect on brain biology and cognitive function when they are combined.

"Our results suggest that it is a high priority to offer comprehensive smoking cessation treatment for all patients, especially for those seeking treatment for alcohol and substance abuse, given the high prevalence of

smoking in these individuals," Dr. Durazzo adds.

Controlling for the genetic variables

Previous research showed that variants in the COMT and BDNF genes influence cognitive function. Therefore, the researchers wanted to determine if variants in these genes explained the poorer cognitive performance they repeatedly observed in their smoking alcohol dependent patients.

In 70, primarily male Veterans seeking treatment for alcohol dependence, Durazzo and colleagues studied the effects of cigarette smoking and genetic factors on cognitive function after about 1-month of abstinence. The results showed after controlling for the influence of these genotypes that smokers performed significantly worse than non-smokers on measures of learning and memory, general intelligence, processing speed and global cognitive abilities. Importantly, within the smoking group, greater number of years of smoking was related to worse cognitive function.

According to Durazzo: "Intact functioning in these areas will assist individuals in incorporating the treatment they receive into their everyday lives."

Overall, the results confirm their previous research and lend strong support to the growing movement to make smoking cessation programs common fare at the inception of alcohol and substance abuse treatments. There are an increasing number of studies that report smokers have a greater chance of relapse to alcohol or substances than non-smokers.

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