

Study Finds People Drink More Alcohol after a Cancer Diagnosis than Before

December 8, 2016

Cancer survivors were more likely to report heavy drinking and more frequent heavy drinking occasions compared to others at the same ages with similar drinking histories, according to a new study from the Alcohol Research Group, a program of the Public Health Institute. Heavy drinking was defined as having five or more drinks at any one time.

When racial and ethnic group-specific effects were evaluated, this increased heavy drinking was found to occur among women and Whites, while no increase was found among Blacks or Hispanics. Study results also suggest that hypertension and having a serious injury did not affect post diagnosis heavy drinking. However, when assessing people diagnosed with heart problems or diabetes, analyses revealed that these individuals actually cut back on their heavy drinking.

The study assessed changes to drinking behaviors as the result of a serious health diagnosis and how these changes differed based on the type of condition, including hypertension, heart problems, diabetes, injuries, and cancer. With well-established evidence that alcohol consumption increases the risk for specific chronic diseases, and that for some types of cancers, in particular breast, head and neck, drinking after diagnosis has been associated with increased mortality, preventative measures are critical.

“If people aren’t reducing heavy drinking after getting diagnosed with a serious health problem, or worse, they’re drinking even more, then we need to find out why,” said lead researcher William C. Kerr, Senior Scientist at the Alcohol Research Group. “Maybe they’re not receiving adequate information on the risks of heavy drinking from their primary or other health care provider or targeted brief interventions are needed to provide additional motivation, strategies and support.”

The results also highlight the need for more effective prevention approaches, in particular health education, counseling, or other mental health support. However, Kerr cautioned that effect differences also existed between racial/ethnic groups and across gender lines.

“These disparities speak to the importance of understanding differences between populations such as racial/ethnic groups both in relation to the causes of negative outcomes and motivations and strategies among those with positive outcomes,” Kerr added. “We need to ensure that health campaigns are appropriate, effective, and inclusive so no one is left behind.”

This study analyzed longitudinal data from the 2010 U.S. National Alcohol Survey, which included 5,240 participants across 50 states.

###

Kerr, W.C., Ye, Y., Greenfield, T.K., Williams, E., Lui, C.K., Li, L., Lown, A.E. (in press) Changes in heavy drinking following onset of health problems in a U.S. general population sample. Preventive Medicine: <http://authors.elsevier.com/sd/article/S0091743516304017>

Support for this paper was provided by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism at the National Institutes of Health under award number P50 AA005595. The content is solely the responsibility

of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health.

If you are interested in arranging an interview with William C. Kerr, Ph.D., or Camillia K. Lui, Ph.D., contact Diane Schmidt, Communications Specialist at the Alcohol Research Group, at (510) 898-5819 or dschmidt@arg.org.