

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“Alcohol Linked to Dementia”

Alcohol flows freely throughout the world. However, study after study is pointing to alcohol as being a cause of a variety of cancers. Furthermore, it is being discredited as having heart healthy benefits. It now appears that any reduction in alcohol consumption will lower the risk of cardiovascular diseases and cancer risk. But, health information campaigns are ineffective against the powerful marketing-forces pushing alcohol. As a public health issue, no one should be pushing and condoning the consumption of alcohol. Early in 2014, the United Kingdom issued new guidelines on alcohol drinking, recommending that men drink no more than women and warning that any amount of alcohol increases the risk of developing a range of cancers. A new 2018 study suggests heavy alcohol consumption is a major risk factor for all types of dementia, but particularly early-onset dementia. The retrospective analysis involving 30 million people in France shows that those with a history of alcohol use disorders had a threefold increased risk for dementia and that over half those with early-onset dementia had a history of alcohol problems. Dr. Michaël Schwarzwinger, lead author said, "Our results suggest that heavy drinking is the strongest potentially modifiable risk factor for dementia that we have ever seen. Our results suggest that one of the best things you can do for your brain health is to cut down your alcohol intake." Another expert said, "This study is "immensely important and highlights the potential of alcohol use disorders, and possibly alcohol consumption, as modifiable risk factors for dementia prevention. This study used a phenomenally large database, and the result showing that half the cases of early-onset dementia were associated with alcohol use disorders is truly staggering." The researchers call for screening and interventions for heavy drinking and treatment for alcohol use disorders to reduce the alcohol-attributable burden of dementia. Quite a lot of work has looked at the effects of light drinking, with several cohort studies suggesting health benefits, including a possible reduction in dementia. But there has been very little research on the effects of heavy drinking, which this new study did. The risk for developing dementia was three times greater, if the patient had a history of alcohol use disorders. Usually anyone with an alcohol use disorder would be drinking more than 5 units of alcohol a day. The World Health Organization defines chronic heavy drinking as consuming more than 60 g of pure alcohol a day for men (around six or more standard drinks per day on average) and more than 40 g per day for women (around four or more standard drinks per day).

In the America that I love, "think before you drink." The mind you save may be yours.

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