
'Problem drinking' can hurt retirees' health—and wealth

By Editorial Staff Fri, Feb 13, 2015

Rates for alcohol-related hospitalizations among adults age 55+ were close to those for heart attacks in the 1990s, and number has greatly increased since then, according to an article in the premier issue of the journal, 'Work, Aging and Retirement.'

Anecdotally, a lot of retirees look forward to that four o'clock gin-and-tonic or bourbon-on-ice as an oasis in an otherwise uneventful afternoon. But a lot of older people evidently partake too much.

The prevalence of alcohol misuse among older adults is "staggering," according to an [article](#) in the premier issue of a new journal, *Work, Aging and Retirement*, published by Oxford University Press and written by Peter A. Bamberger of Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations.

The study suggests that alcohol misuse in retirement—from loneliness, boredom or other reasons—could, by driving up a retiree's health care costs, have a big impact on retirement wealth and income. For instance, alcohol plays a role in many hospital admissions for accidental falls, which account for 40% of accidental injuries among older people.

"In the United States, the prevalence of heavy drinking (i.e., more than seven drinks per week or two drinks on any one occasion) is estimated at about 10% for men 65 and older and 2.5% for women 65 and older, with some studies estimating the prevalence of alcohol misuse among older (i.e., age 50+) men at 16% or higher," Bamberger writes in "Winding Down and Boozing Up: The Complex Link Between Retirement and Alcohol Misuse."

Bamberger's review of the literature on age and alcoholism showed evidence that about 10% of all alcoholics are over the age of 60, compared to rates of frequent heavy drinking of 9.2% and of 5.4% for alcohol abuse among the overall U.S. workforce.

The U.S. is not alone in this respect. Similar figures are reported in countries other than the United States, the study said. In the UK, 17% of men (and 7% of women) aged 65 and over drank more than the weekly guideline of 21 units of alcohol (approximately three drinks per day).

In Japan, where 23% of men aged 20–64 consume 40g (approximately four drinks) or more of alcohol a day, 48% of men (and 10% of women) over the age of 55 drank alcohol almost daily, with over 25% of the men consuming over 60g (i.e., six drinks) per day.

The health-related costs associated with older adult alcohol misuse are high. Studies cited in the new report indicate that up to 22% of older adults presenting to the emergency room or hospitalized may misuse alcohol or suffer from an alcohol use disorder, and that 20% of nursing home patients have a history of alcohol misuse.

While rates for alcohol-related hospitalizations among older adults (age 55+) were already close to those for heart attacks in the 1990s, the number of such admissions has increased substantially since then (a 32% increase between 1995 and 2002 for adults >55 years versus a general population increase of only 12% for this same period, the study showed).

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