Alcohol-Related Liver Disease Has More Than Doubled Since 1999

Study findings can help guide physicians to better treat patients and encourage more screenings and interventions for high-risk groups.

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The rate of alcohol-related liver disease (ALD) among heavy drinkers in the United States has more than doubled over the last 20 years, according to a new study led by Keck Medicine of USC researchers.

ALD is the result of liver damage caused by heavy consumption of alcohol. It is also a major reason for liver transplantation in the United States, according to Hep's Health Basics on ALD.

Published in Clinical Gastroenterology and Hepatology, findings show that women, adults 45 and older, low-income individuals and people with metabolic syndromes, such as obesity and high blood pressure, accounted for the greater share of heavy drinkers.

"These findings—the first comprehensive look at the demographics of heavy drinking and their relation to liver disease since the 1990s—provide important new information about which population groups may need more intervention to curb alcohol use and may also explain the rise in liver disease over the years," said lead study author Brian Lee, MD, MAS, a hepatologist and liver transplant specialist with Keck Medicine, in a news release.

What's more, the study found that the average drinking rate in America was mostly unchanged over the last two decades before the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting that factors such as changing health and demographic profiles may contribute to the increase in liver disease.

For the study, researchers analyzed data on the health and nutritional status of more than 44,600 U.S. adults from 1999 to 2020. They tracked the total increase in significant liver disease, which is the stage at which the liver forms scar tissue, often caused by drinking, that impairs liver function.

There is no simple test for ALD. Health care providers make a diagnosis based on history of alcohol use, symptoms, a physical exam and blood tests. Liver biopsy and imaging studies, such as an MRI, may also be performed.

Researchers hope that study findings will help guide physicians to better treat patients and encourage more screenings and interventions for those at highest risk.

In related news, a recent study found that deaths due to alcohol-related cancers in the United States have also nearly doubled since 1990. The study focused on seven of the most common types of alcohol-related cancers: breast, colorectal, esophagus, liver, mouth, throat and voice box (larynx). Most alcohol-related cancer deaths in 2021 were caused by liver cancer (7,408), colon cancer (4,687) and esophageal cancer (3,948).

What's more, earlier this year Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, MD, issued an advisory highlighting the link between alcohol and cancer and recommending steps to lower these rates. The advisory urges, for example, that health warning labels on alcohol containers be updated to include cancer risk.
