Three Risk Factors May Increase Liver Disease Risk in Heavy Drinkers

Preexisting health conditions, including diabetes and high blood pressure, may have a significant impact on how alcohol affects the liver.

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Heavy drinkers with three common underlying conditions are more likely to develop advanced liver disease, according to a study by researchers at the Keck Medicine of University of Southern California.

Published in Clinical Gastroenterology and Hepatology, the study found that heavy drinkers with diabetes, high blood pressure or a high waist circumference face a more than twofold (2.4) greater risk of developing advanced liver disease compared with those without these conditions.

Heavy alcohol consumption can lead to fat accumulation in the liver. The buildup of fat can lead to several health conditions, including inflammation, fibrosis, cirrhosis and even liver cancer. This particularly concerning since alcohol consumption has been on the rise among Americans since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Diabetes, high blood pressure and a high waist circumference (35 inches for women and 40 inches for men) are among a cluster of five health conditions that impact one's risk for heart attack and stroke, known as cardiometabolic risk factors.

Cardiometabolic health has been worsening among Americans, especially among those under 35 years old, according to researchers. Indeed, these risk factors affect more than one in three Americans.

What's more, these risk factors have been linked to metabolic dysfunction-associated steatotic liver disease (MASLD), which is responsible for a growing proportion of advanced liver disease, mirroring a global rise in obesity.

“The results identify a very high-risk segment of the population prone to liver disease and suggest that preexisting health issues may have a large impact on how alcohol affects the liver,” said the study’s principal investigator, Brian Lee, MD, MAS, a hepatologist and liver transplant specialist with Keck Medicine, in the release.

For the study, researchers analyzed data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey on more than 40,000 participants. Researchers examined links between heavy drinking, cardiometabolic risk factors and liver fibrosis, which can lead to liver failure.

Heavy drinking was defined as 1.5 drinks (20 grams) per day for women and two drinks (30 grams) per day for men.

The study suggest that diabetes, high blood pressure and a high waist circumference contribute to fat buildup in the liver and, when combined with extra fat deposits in the liver from excessive alcohol consumption, can cause considerable liver damage.

Lee emphasizes that heavy drinking remains dangerous even for those without cardiometabolic risks.

“We know that alcohol is toxic to the liver, and all heavy drinkers are at risk for advanced liver disease,” Lee said.

Researchers encourage individuals to consider their health and cardiometabolic risks when making decisions about alcohol consumption. They also emphasize the need for increased health screenings and interventions for people with cardiometabolic risk factors who drink to help minimize and treat liver damage early on.

In related news, the United States Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy released a new Surgeon General’s Advisory on Alcohol and Cancer Risk, outlining the direct link between alcohol consumption and increased cancer risk.

Alcohol consumption, which increases the risk for at least seven types of cancer, is the third leading preventable cause of cancer in the United States, after tobacco and obesity. Although scientific evidence for this connection has been growing over the past four decades, less than half of Americans recognize it as a risk factor for cancer.

The surgeon general's advisory includes a series of recommendations to increase awareness to help minimize alcohol-related cancer cases and deaths, including updating the existing surgeon general's health warning label on alcohol-containing beverages.

To read more, click #Alcohol or #Liver Health. There, you'll see headlines such as "Moderate Alcohol Consumption Fuels Liver Disease Progression in People With MASLD," "U.S. Surgeon General Issues New Advisory on Link Between Alcohol and Cancer Risk" and "Connecticut Group Advocates for Better Liver Health Awareness."

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