

ALCOHOL AND YOUR BRAIN: HEALING OR HURTING?



BRAIN HEALTH 365

ANSWERING YOUR QUESTIONS

Q: Does drinking alcohol kill brain cells?

A: Alcohol is a neurotoxin that can disrupt communications of the brain. It also affects the functions of brain cells. This can lead to intellectual impairment, headaches, memory loss, slowed thinking, slurred speech, and trouble with balance and coordination. Excessive drinking can affect your nervous system, causing numbness and pain in your hands and feet, seizures and dementia.

Alcohol also is toxic to a developing brain during pregnancy and can cause congenital disabilities, including developmental disorders.

Q: Can drinking alcohol improve mood?

A: Short-term, moderate use can help you feel relaxed and less inhibited, but alcohol is a depressant. Heavy drinking increases your risk for depression, anxiety, irritability and rapid mood changes. This can lead to relationship problems and impaired judgment. In severe cases, heavy alcohol consumption can cause a person to hallucinate, become paranoid and lose touch with reality.

Q: Is alcohol good for heart health?

A: Research has shown that drinking moderate amounts of alcohol can benefit your heart health. Studies have found that drinking alcohol in moderation increases your high-density lipoprotein (HDL), or "good" cholesterol, which helps carry away and break down extra cholesterol in the blood that could otherwise block your arteries. Alcohol thins your blood, too, making it less likely that your arteries will form a blood clot. Moderate alcohol intake can lower inflammation throughout your body.

However, drinking more than the recommended amount of alcohol can lead to heart problems. Too much alcohol may raise your blood pressure and triglyceride levels, putting you at higher risk for heart disease.



Q: Does binge drinking lead to liver disease?

A: Possibly. People who drink alcohol excessively have an increased risk of developing liver disease or liver failure, but not every person will develop these conditions.

The liver is essential for digesting foods and beverages. It breaks down alcohol and eliminates it from the body. Each person has a different alcohol metabolism, which is the ability to break down and eliminate alcohol. This metabolism is controlled by genetic factors, the amount of alcohol consumed and overall nutrition. Heavy drinking can cause increased fat and inflammation in the liver. Over time, this can cause irreversible damage and scarring of liver tissue, called cirrhosis. If left untreated, advanced cirrhosis can develop into liver failure, a life-threatening condition.

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