

Alcohol boosts stroke risk in new Finnish study

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American Heart Association/American Stroke Association

World Stroke Day is Oct. 29, bringing attention to how to spot a [stroke](#) and how to prevent one. On the prevention front, a new University of Eastern Finland study shows excessive alcohol consumption increases the progression of atherosclerosis and the risk of stroke in middle-aged men. The findings were reported as part of the [FinnDrink Study](#) Oct. 21 and mirror earlier data showing an increased stroke risk for drinkers of both genders regardless of age, even with only moderate consumption.

The Finnish research found that progression of atherosclerosis over an 11-year follow-up was increased among men who consumed six or more drinks on one occasion. Stroke risk also increased among men who had at least one hangover per year. Drinking large quantities of alcohol more than twice a week also increased the risk of stroke death in men.

And strokes aren't only a concern for older adults. Early in 2013, a separate study at the University of California at San Francisco ([UCSF](#)) concluded that one of every five strokes occurs in people between 18 and 44 years of age. That's men *and* women.

"When a young person has a stroke, it is probably much more likely that the cause of their stroke is something other than traditional risk factors," such as hypertension and obesity, according to one of the lead researchers in the study. (See the entire [examiner.com article](#))

The UCSF researchers say long-term changes in the heart as a result of alcohol abuse or the disease of [alcoholism](#) may put younger users at higher-than-average risk earlier in life. "Substance abuse is common in young adults experiencing a stroke," according to the research team. "Patients aged younger than 55 years who experience a stroke should be routinely screened and counseled regarding substance abuse."

Neither study offers evidence that patients' drug or alcohol use directly caused the strokes. It's possible, for example, that people who abuse alcohol or have the disease of alcoholism also see their doctors less often or engage in other risky behaviors that increase the chance of stroke.

Stroke disables more people in the United States than breast cancer or the war in Afghanistan. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([CDC](#)), nearly 800,000 people in the United States have a stroke every year. Strokes (either ischemic or hemorrhagic) are the most common causes of serious long-term disability. Ninety percent of strokes are ischemic, where a clot blocks blood flow to the brain.

Additional statistics from the [National Stroke Association](#) reveal:

- Stroke kills almost 130,000 Americans each year—that's 1 in every 19 deaths.
- On average, one American dies from stroke every 4 minutes.
- Fewer than 20 percent of hospitals are stroke certified.
- One fourth of strokes are recurrent strokes.
- Stroke costs the United States an estimated \$38.6 billion each year.

Stroke risk is heightened by even a small amount of alcohol according to an Oct. 26 study posted on Canadian medical news website [Tele-Management](#). Just one drink of alcohol was found to double stroke risk immediately after consuming the beverage. After two hours, the risk of stroke is increased 1.6 times when compared to the risk before having the drink.

The research was not based on any specific type of alcoholic beverage.

The World Stroke Day campaign emphasizes the importance of seeing a physician regularly and quickly recognizing the signs of a stroke. The American Stroke Association and American Heart Association use the acronym **FAST**, encouraging people to be on the lookout for weakness in one side of the **F**ace or **A**rm weakness or **S**peech difficulty as signs it is **T**ime to call 9-1-1. Some stroke treatments can only be used during a short "window of opportunity" after the stroke, just like has been commonly accepted as a window of opportunity for getting help to someone who's had a heart attack.

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