

Health Risks of Alcohol: 12 Health Problems Associated with Chronic Heavy Drinking

By David Freeman

WebMD Feature

Reviewed by Marina Katz, MD

It's no secret that alcohol consumption can cause major health problems, including [cirrhosis of the liver](#) and injuries sustained in automobile accidents. But if you think [liver](#) disease and car crashes are the *only* health risks posed by drinking, think again: Researchers have linked alcohol consumption to more than 60 diseases.

"Alcohol does all kinds of things in the body, and we're not fully aware of all its effects," says James C. Garbutt, MD, professor of [psychiatry](#) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Medicine and a researcher at the university's Bowles Center for Alcohol Studies. "It's a pretty complicated little molecule."

Here are 12 conditions linked to chronic heavy drinking.

Anemia

Heavy drinking can cause the number of oxygen-carrying red [blood cells](#) to be abnormally low. This condition, known as [anemia](#), can trigger a host of symptoms, including [fatigue](#), shortness of breath, and lightheadedness.

Cancer

"Habitual drinking increases the risk of [cancer](#)," says Jurgen Rehm, PhD, chairman of the University of Toronto's department of [addiction](#) policy and a senior scientist at the Centre for Addiction and [Mental Health](#), also in Toronto. Scientists believe the increased risk comes when the body converts alcohol into acetaldehyde, a potent carcinogen. [Cancer](#) sites linked to alcohol use include the [mouth](#), pharynx (throat), larynx (voice box), [esophagus](#), [liver](#), [breast](#), and colorectal region. [Cancer](#) risk rises even higher in heavy drinkers who also use [tobacco](#).

Cardiovascular disease

Heavy drinking, especially bingeing, makes platelets more likely to clump together into [blood clots](#), which can lead to [heart attack](#) or [stroke](#). In a landmark study published in 2005, Harvard researchers found that binge drinking doubled the risk of death among people who initially survived a [heart attack](#).

Heavy drinking can also cause [cardiomyopathy](#), a potentially deadly condition in which the [heart](#) muscle weakens and eventually fails, as well as heart rhythm abnormalities such as

atrial and ventricular fibrillation. [Atrial fibrillation](#), in which the heart's upper chambers (atria) twitch chaotically rather than constrict rhythmically, can cause blood clots that can trigger a [stroke](#). Ventricular fibrillation causes chaotic [twitching](#) in the heart's main pumping chambers (ventricles). It causes rapid loss of consciousness and, in the absence of immediate treatment, sudden death.

Cirrhosis

Alcohol is toxic to liver cells, and many heavy drinkers develop cirrhosis, a sometimes-lethal condition in which the liver is so heavily scarred that it is unable to function. But it's hard to predict which drinkers will develop cirrhosis. "Some people who drink huge amounts never get cirrhosis, and some who don't drink very much do get it," Saitz says. For some unknown reason, women seem to be especially vulnerable.

Dementia

As people age, their brains shrink, on average, at a rate of about 1.9% per decade. That's considered normal. But heavy drinking speeds the shrinkage of certain key regions in the [brain](#), resulting in [memory loss](#) and other symptoms of [dementia](#).

Heavy drinking can also lead to subtle but potentially debilitating deficits in the ability to plan, make judgments, solve problems, and perform other aspects of "[executive function](#)," which are "the higher-order abilities that allow us to maximize our function as human beings," Garbutt says.

In addition to the "nonspecific" dementia that stems from [brain](#) atrophy, heavy drinking can cause nutritional deficiencies so severe that they trigger other forms of dementia.

Depression

It's long been known that heavy drinking often goes hand in hand with [depression](#), but there has been debate about which came first -- the drinking or the [depression](#). One theory is that depressed people turned to alcohol in an attempt to "self-medicate" to ease their emotional pain. But a large study from New Zealand showed that it was probably the other way around -- that is, heavy drinking led to [depression](#).

Research has also shown that [depression](#) improves when heavy drinkers go on the wagon, Saitz says.

Seizures

Heavy drinking can [cause epilepsy](#) and can trigger [seizures](#) even in people who don't have [epilepsy](#). It can also interfere with the action of the [medications](#) used to treat convulsions.

Gout

A painful condition, [gout](#) is caused by the formation of uric acid crystals in the joints. Although some cases are largely hereditary, alcohol and other dietary factors seem to play a role. Alcohol also seems to aggravate existing cases of [gout](#).

High blood pressure

Alcohol can disrupt the sympathetic [nervous system](#), which, among other things, controls the constriction and dilation of [blood](#) vessels in response to stress, temperature, exertion, etc. Heavy drinking -- and bingeing, in particular -- can cause [blood pressure](#) to rise. Over time, this effect can become chronic. [High blood pressure](#) can lead to many other health problems, including [kidney disease](#), [heart disease](#), and [stroke](#).

Infectious disease

Heavy drinking suppresses the immune system, providing a foothold for infections, including [tuberculosis](#), [pneumonia](#), [HIV/AIDS](#), and other [sexually transmitted diseases](#) (including some that [cause infertility](#)). People who drink heavily also are more likely to engage in risky [sex](#). "Heavy drinking is associated with a three-fold increase in the risk of contracting a [sexually transmitted disease](#)," Rehm says.

Nerve damage

Heavy drinking can cause a form of [nerve damage](#) known as [alcoholic neuropathy](#), which can produce a painful pins-and-needles feeling or numbness in the extremities as well as muscle [weakness](#), [incontinence](#), [constipation](#), [erectile dysfunction](#), and other problems. Alcoholic neuropathy may arise because alcohol is toxic to nerve cells, or because nutritional deficiencies attributable to heavy drinking compromise nerve function.

Pancreatitis

In addition to causing [stomach](#) irritation ([gastritis](#)), drinking can inflame the [pancreas](#). Chronic [pancreatitis](#) interferes with the digestive process, causing severe [abdominal pain](#) and persistent [diarrhea](#) --and "it's not fixable," Saitz says. Some cases of chronic [pancreatitis](#) are triggered by [gallstones](#), but up to 60% stem from alcohol consumption.

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