

Binge drinking raises risk of developing alcohol problems, even for moderate drinkers

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Moderate drinkers who binge alcohol are at a significantly higher risk of developing alcohol problems than those who drink the same amount overall but don't binge, according to a new study from researchers at The

University of Texas at Austin appearing in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.

After analyzing a national sample of US adults, UT Austin psychology professor Charles Holahan, Ph.D., and his collaborators found that moderate average drinkers with a pattern of binge drinking were almost five times more likely to experience multiple [alcohol](#) problems and were twice as likely to experience more alcohol problems nine years later. Moderate drinking is defined as having on average no more than one drink a day for women and two for men. Binge drinking is defined as consuming five or more drinks on the same occasion.

"What this means," said Dr. Holahan, "is that an individual whose total consumption is seven drinks on Saturday night presents a greater risk profile than someone whose total consumption is a daily drink with dinner, even though their average drinking level is the same."

This research supports a growing recognition that binge drinking among adults is a public health concern and calls for increased public health efforts to address such drinking.

Research on binge drinking tends to focus on adolescents and [college students](#), but most binge drinking occurs among adults over 30, and the prevalence of binge drinking in adults is increasing. However, research on adult alcohol consumption and its effects usually focuses only on a person's average level of drinking, which masks binge drinking patterns. As a result, the impact of binge drinking among low and moderate adult drinkers has not been well studied or understood.

"In both scientific and media discussions of [moderate drinking](#), the pattern of drinking is generally overlooked," said Rudolf Moos, Ph.D., one of the study's co-authors and professor emeritus of psychiatry and [behavioral sciences](#) at Stanford University School of Medicine. "This

leaves many drinkers mistakenly assuming that a moderate average level of consumption is safe, regardless of drinking pattern."

To get a better understanding of the impact of drinking patterns, the researchers analyzed survey responses from 1,229 drinkers ages 30 and older. The data, taken from two waves of the Midlife Development in the United States study, allowed the researchers to see how respondents' drinking patterns affected them over nine years. What the investigators found surprised them: Most cases of binge drinking—and of multiple [alcohol problems](#)—occurred among individuals who were average [moderate drinkers](#).

"Much [binge drinking](#) among adults escapes public health scrutiny," said Dr. Holahan, "because it occurs among individuals who drink at a moderate average level. These findings point to a need for alcohol interventions targeting moderate average level drinkers in addition to conventional strategies focusing on the higher risk, but smaller, population of habitually high-level drinkers."

More information: Binge Drinking and Alcohol Problems Among Moderate Average-Level Drinkers, *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.amepre.2022.03.021](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2022.03.021)

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