

Better social drinkers don't earn more, shows East Asian study

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Social drinking after work is traditionally seen as an important way to build relationships in East Asia. There's sometimes even a fear that missing out could leave you on the back foot when climbing the career

ladder.

However, a joint paper looking at the drinking habits and [economic situation](#) of working men in Japan, Taiwan and South Korea has found that those who can drink more do not seem to have a financial leg-up over their alcohol-intolerant and less-drinking colleagues. As almost half of the population in East Asia has some intolerance to alcohol, and with the growth of the sober-curious lifestyle, this result may come as good news to those who don't want to have to drink to get ahead. The study is published in the journal *Health Economics*.

Have you ever felt pressured to join an afterwork drinking party, even if you're more inclined to having some tea than getting tipsy? In East Asia, drinking with your colleagues is traditionally seen as an almost essential part of the working culture. Drinking parties are used to build trust, get closer to your boss or subordinates, and discuss topics more candidly than in the workplace. However, a joint study between researchers in Japan, Taiwan and South Korea appears to show that those who drink more don't necessarily reap extra financial benefits at work, compared to those who drink less.

"We found no justification for drinking for the purpose of improving labor market outcomes," said Professor Daiji Kawaguchi, an economist from the Graduate School of Public Policy at the University of Tokyo. "Despite the widespread perception that drinking is important for business communication in East Asia, we did not find evidence supporting the idea. Health research has already found that there is no benefit of heavy alcohol consumption in terms of improving [health outcomes](#), so I think this is important knowledge for when a person decides to drink or not."

The team surveyed working men aged 25 to 59 years old with a list of 45 questions, including ones on health, drinking habits, finances and weekly

working hours. Respondents also self-checked their alcohol tolerance using a simple stick-on alcohol patch test. In total, about 3,500 men from across the three regions participated. The researchers were particularly interested in Asian men not only because of the work-related drinking culture, but also because of alcohol flush, or "Asian flush," syndrome (AFS), which causes people's faces to turn red while they also quickly experience headaches, sickness and other symptoms due to a genetic inability to digest alcohol.

"We wanted to find out if a wage premium existed for those with a higher alcohol tolerance," explained Kawaguchi. "Although our results showed that alcohol-tolerant men do drink more often and more each time than alcohol-intolerant men, there was no significant difference across the three populations in terms of working hours or earnings between them." About 52% of the respondents in Japan and Taiwan and about 60% in South Korea were alcohol intolerant, which the researchers say is in line with figures reported in medical literature.

A limitation of the study was that the South Korean sample size was smaller (around 500 people, compared to 1,000 from Taiwan and 2,000 from Japan), restricted to the capital city of Seoul, and included a disproportionate number of college-educated respondents (92%) compared to the national educational average. "We would like to do a similar analysis again," said Kawaguchi, "but next time with a much larger data set and in collaboration with other specialists, to look in more detail at genome bank data and alcohol digestive ability in combination with socioeconomic outcomes."

With a general trend in young people from high-income countries towards drinking less—which in 2022 led Japan's National Tax Agency to even encourage the country's youth to drink more (due to declining [tax revenues](#))—this result will hopefully come as good news that you don't have to get drinking to get ahead. "I enjoy social [drinking](#) despite

my intolerance to [alcohol](#)," Kawaguchi said. "However, no one should be pressured to drink."

More information: Daiji Kawaguchi et al, Is Asian flushing syndrome a disadvantage in the labor market?, *Health Economics* (2023). [DOI: 10.1002/hec.4675](#)

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