

Stroke Risks Rise With Alcohol Consumption

If you drink alcohol regularly, you may be increasing your risk of stroke. That's the conclusion of a study by a group of cardiologists who examined the connection between alcohol consumption and atrial fibrillation, a condition in which the upper chambers of the heart beat irregularly.

For some people, researchers say, drinking regularly can lead to an enlargement of the left atrium, a chamber in the heart that collects blood. An enlarged atrium can lead to atrial fibrillation, which can cause blood clots to form. If a clot breaks free and blocks a blood vessel to the brain, it can cause a stroke.

The findings, the authors wrote, "are consistent with the notion that chronic alcohol consumption, even at moderate levels, can be cardiotoxic."

What researchers studied

Researchers examined data from 5,220 participants in an earlier heart study, looking at their blood pressure readings over a six-year period, along with their answers to questions about how much alcohol they drank regularly. The average age of the participants was 56.3 years.

Earlier studies had found that chronic drinkers, especially those who had two or more drinks per day, show up to a 30 percent higher risk for atrial fibrillation. The recent study sought to explore the way that connection works by making repeated assessments of the size of the atrium and how much alcohol participants drink.

Chronic drinking, the authors wrote, can lead to structural changes in the atrium that can make the drinker more vulnerable to atrial fibrillation later in life.

What is atrial fibrillation?

Normally, the heart's upper chambers expand and contract in a regular rhythm. In episodes of atrial fibrillation, the upper chambers fall out of rhythm and quiver, which means they aren't effectively moving blood out of the heart. The American Heart Association says at least 2.7 million Americans are living with atrial fibrillation and many don't know it, because symptoms may not be apparent.

But for some, symptoms of atrial fibrillation include:

- Noticeable irregularities in the beating of the heart
- Nausea
- Light-headedness or faintness
- Weakness or general fatigue
- Chest pain or pressure

People who experience these symptoms should seek medical care immediately, even if the symptoms seem to disappear, the Heart Association says.

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