Risks of Excessive Drinking During the Holiday Season

Special occasions like New Year's Eve are often associated with heavy alcohol use, which is linked to liver disease, cancer and early death.

December 30, 2024 By Laura Schmidt

This time of year is accompanied by holiday parties and celebrations that often include large amounts of alcohol. To unpack how much alcohol is too much as well as the risks of excessive drinking, CNN interviewed wellness expert Leana Wen, MD.

It is well known that excessive alcohol use can have negative immediate and long-term effects. It is associated with several chronic illnesses including heart disease, cancer and early death.

About 178,000 people die from excessive alcohol use each year in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). What's more, alcohol-related deaths in the United States have doubled over the last two decades.

Heavy alcohol use is also linked to several types of liver disease including cirrhosis, acute hepatitis and metabolic dysfunction-associated steatotic liver disease (MASLD). The liver processes what the body needs and discards what it doesn't, including alcohol. If there is too much alcohol, the liver can't process it, which increases the risk of of liver damage. Over time, that damage can become serious.

In addition to liver damage, alcohol causes cancer because it contains ethanol, which is a carcinogen that can damage DNA, increase estrogen (known to promote breast cancer) and cause esophageal, mouth and throat and liver cancers.

According to the CDC, long-term alcohol use can lead to other conditions including high blood pressure, stroke, weaker immune system, alcohol-use disorder and more,

With New Year's Eve fast approaching, Wen warns that people who drink alcohol should also be aware that there are separate, additional risks associated with binge drinking, which is consuming large amounts on one occasion.

"Those who binge drink face two sets of additional risks compared with those who space out their drinks," Wen told CNN. "First, a large amount of alcohol places stress on your organs. Second, those who binge drink are at higher risk of injuries like falls, drownings and car accidents."

The National Institutes of Health defines heavy alcohol use as:

- For men, consuming 5 or more drinks on any day or 15 or more drinks per week
- For women, consuming 4 or more drinks on any day or 8 or more drinks per week

When it comes to overall health, regular alcohol consumption can also make it difficult for adults to meet food group and nutrient needs while not consuming excess calories, according to Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which provides recommendation on what the average American should eat and drink to promote health and help prevent chronic disease.

For those struggling to limit their alcohol intake, Wen suggests reducing temptation by avoiding settings where alcohol may be offered and planning ahead. For example, call a restaurant or venue before an occasion to find out if they offer nonalcoholic drinks.

"People who experience symptoms when they stop or reduce drinking should seek medical assistance," Wen said. "In addition, those who find themselves unable to cut back should contact their primary care provider. There are effective treatments for alcohol use disorder, and no one should be ashamed to seek help."

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's National Helpline is a free, confidential, 24/7, 365-day-a-year treatment referral and information service (in English and Spanish) for individuals and families facing mental and/or substance use disorders.

To read more, click #Alcohol. There, you'll find headlines such as "Moderate Alcohol Consumption Fuels Liver Disease Progression in People With MASLD," "Beer-Only Drinkers' Diets are Worse Than Wine Drinkers" and "40% of Cancer Cases and Almost Half of Deaths in U.S. Linked to Modifiable Risk Factors."

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