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Heavy Drinking in Youth Tied to Heart Risks Later

by Amy Norton

(Reuters Health) People who drink heavily in their youth may have a higher risk of developing a collection of risk factors for heart disease and stroke, new research suggests.

In a study that examined the lifetime drinking habits of more than 2,800 adults, researchers found that those who drank heavily in their teens and young adulthood were more likely to have metabolic syndrome than those who drank more moderately throughout adulthood.



Metabolic syndrome refers to a grouping of risk factors for heart disease, stroke and diabetes -- including abdominal obesity, high blood pressure, low levels of "good" HDL cholesterol, high blood sugar and high triglycerides, a type of blood fat. People who have three or more of these problems are considered to have metabolic syndrome.

While moderate drinking can be heart-healthy -- helping to boost HDL levels, for example -- excessive drinking is not. The new findings suggest that drinking heavily early in life might contribute to metabolic syndrome later on.

"There are already many reasons for encouraging young people to avoid heavy drinking," Dr. Marcia Russell, one of the researchers on the study, told Reuters Health.

"Long-term health consequences, such as an increased risk of cardiovascular disease, may be another," added Russell, a researcher at the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation in Berkeley, California.

She and her colleagues report their findings in the *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism*.

The study included 2,818 adults ages 35 to 80 who were questioned about their lifetime drinking habits and other lifestyle factors, like whether they exercised regularly or smoked.

All of the study participants had consumed alcohol regularly at some point in their lives, but Russell and her colleagues were able to identify two major lifetime "trajectories" of drinking: in one, people started drinking early in life and tended to drink heavily in their teens and young adulthood, then tapered off by middle-age; in the second, "stable" trajectory, people generally drank moderately over the years.

Compared with the stable group, the early drinkers were almost one-third more likely to have metabolic syndrome. In addition, their risk of being abdominally obese was 48 percent higher, while their odds of having low HDL cholesterol were 62 percent higher.

Russell said that to her knowledge, this is the first study to take the "lifetime approach" to understanding the relationship between alcohol and health, and more research is needed to confirm the findings.

However, it is plausible that early, heavy drinking contributes to metabolic syndrome later on. Russell noted

that excessive drinking causes oxidative stress in the body -- a state that damages body cells over time and is thought to contribute to cardiovascular disease and other ills.

She also pointed out that alcohol contains 7 calories per gram, versus only 4 calories per gram of carbohydrate or protein. Those calories, coupled with the appetite-stimulating effect of alcohol, may help explain the link between early drinking and excess weight.

SOURCE: Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism, January 2008.