

Moderate drinkers end up better thinkers

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Moderate drinkers have been found to be better thinkers than heavy drinkers and those who do not drink at all, according to the Australian National University research. In a study of more than 7000 people aged 20-24, 40-44 and 60-64, participants were asked about their alcohol use, and to perform a series of tests to measure cognition - verbal skills, memory and speed of thinking.

ANU researchers Dr Kaarin Anstey and Dr Bryan Rodgers found that people who had drunk moderate amounts of alcohol (14-28 standard drinks a week for men and 7-14 standard drinks a week for women) performed significantly better than those who were heavy drinkers (over 28 and 14 standard drinks for men and women respectively) and those who rarely or never drank. This relationship was found in participants in their 20s, 40s and 60s.

In articles published online in the journal *Addiction* the researchers outlined some of the reasons for the disparity.

“We found that people who did not drink were more likely to have poorer mental and physical health, less education, and poorer lifestyles,” Dr Anstey said. “However, these factors are not sufficient to fully explain the results and further research is required to obtain a clearer picture of exactly what this means for our thinking abilities.”

Dr Rodgers said: “This does not necessarily show that moderate alcohol use is good for our brains - there may be other reasons that we haven’t measured to explain the poor performance of non-drinkers.”

Their findings are the latest from the PATH Through Life project, a 20-year study of change in thinking and mood as people age, which was initiated by the ANU Centre for Mental Health Research in 1999.

Other findings from the project have included:

- Strong associations between childhood adversity and adult depression. Factors most strongly related to depression include: mother's depression, reports of neglectful upbringing, too much physical punishment, having an unaffectionate father, and experiencing a lot of family conflict.
- Bisexual people tended to suffer more from anxiety, depression and suicidal tendency than homosexual or heterosexual study participants.
- Young Australian adults are the least likely to obtain GP care, compared to other age groups - despite evidence of significant mental health problems, such as tendencies towards suicide and substance abuse. The study found that those who used GPs were most likely to be female, to have been or be undertaking higher education and to be living with children. Young adults were also identified as having poorer physical health, more chronic diseases and higher levels of suicidal ideation when regularly using marijuana.
- Elevated symptoms of depression, anxiety and negativity were related to levels of tobacco consumption and marijuana use for both young men and women.

Dr Anstey was recently awarded the The Margret M. Baltes Early Investigator Award in Behavioral and Social Gerontology from the Gerontology Society of America in recognition of her outstanding early career contribution to gerontology.

Source: The Australian National University

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