

Alcohol and the risk of dementia

Learn how drinking too much alcohol can damage the brain and increase a person's risk of developing dementia.

Does alcohol increase the risk of dementia?

Evidence shows that excessive alcohol consumption increases a person's risk of developing dementia.

Drinking alcohol in moderation has not been conclusively linked to an increased risk of dementia. If you already drink alcohol within the recommended guidelines, you do not need to stop on the grounds of reducing the risk of dementia.

Despite some claims, drinking alcohol in moderation has not been shown to offer significant protection against developing dementia. So if you do not currently drink alcohol, you should not start as a way to reduce dementia risk.

How to reduce the risk of dementia

A lifelong approach to good health is the best way to lower your risk of dementia.

There are some lifestyle behaviours with enough evidence to show that changing them will reduce your risk of dementia.

How alcohol can damage the brain

Drinking alcohol is linked to reduced volume of the brain's white matter, which helps to transmit signals between different brain regions. This can lead to issues with the way the brain functions. Alcohol consumption above recommended limits (of 14 units per week) over a long period of time may shrink the parts of the brain involved in memory. Drinking more than 28 units per week can lead to a sharper decline in thinking skills as people get older.

Long-term heavy drinking can also result in a lack of vitamin B1 (thiamine) and **Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome** which affects short-term memory.

Alcohol-related brain damage (ARBD) is a brain disorder which covers several different conditions including Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome and alcohol-related dementia. It is caused by regularly drinking too much alcohol over several years.

Guidelines for moderate drinking

Current NHS guidelines state that both men and women should limit their intake to 14 units a week. A unit is dependent on the amount of pure alcohol in a given volume and can be calculated for specific drinks.

If you regularly drink much more than this, you are increasing your risk of damage to your brain and other organs, and so increasing your risk of dementia.

Units are based on typical alcohol by volume (ABV) content. However, this does vary. If you're buying a bottle or can, it's helpful to check the ABV content on the label.

The NHS basic guideline for units of alcohol is as follows:

- A typical glass (175ml) of (12% ABV) wine: 2 units.