

The Long Term Effects of Alcohol on the Body & Brain

Even though it's legal, alcohol (ethanol) is classified as a drug. Since social drinking has become very commonplace in our society, many people are unaware of the long term effects that it has on the body and brain. Depending on the length of time someone has been drinking, and the amount consumed regularly, or in bingeing episodes, the impact can have moderate to severe outcomes. People usually initially start drinking to feel good, but as drinking becomes more consistent, they feel as though they have to drink to avoid bouts of sadness or depression.

Left untreated, alcoholism can lead to permanent brain dysfunction, disabilities, chronic pain, disease states, and death. The cumulative effects of drinking are the most damaging, but even the short term effects can be detrimental due to decreased inhibitions, blackouts, and slowed reaction times.

When alcohol enters the stomach, it moves through the small intestine and is then dispersed into the bloodstream. The liver attempts to break down the alcohol and eliminate it from the body through sweating, breathing, and through waste. The problem is that the liver is only capable of breaking down small amounts of alcohol, so the remaining amount is infiltrated into the organs and soft tissue. This trapped alcohol is what causes peripheral nervous system (PNS) and central nervous system (CNS) adverse reactions, which is explained in detail below.

Alcohol's Effects on the Body

- 1. Liver Damage:** Since the liver has to work overtime to try to naturally detox the body, long term liver damage and diseases like cancer or cirrhosis are prominent in drinkers.
- 2. Heart & Vascular:** Alcohol consumption is a leading cause of cardiovascular diseases such as heart attacks and strokes.
- 3. Infections:** Alcohol inhibits the body's ability to fight off bacterial and viral infections.



- 4. Stomach & Intestinal Disorders:** causes ulcers, diarrhea, bloating and leaky gut syndrome.
- 5. Pancreatitis:** Excess glucose and alcohol leads to inflammation of the pancreas and can lead to cancer.
- 6. Sexual Health:** Alcohol causes erectile dysfunction and vaginal atrophy.
- 7. Neuropathy:** Nerve damage from excessive alcohol consumption may lead to numbness and tingling in the extremities.
- 8. Coordination:** Balance issues may arise from lack of coordination, muscle atrophy, and muscle cramping.

- 9. Cancer:** Drinking alcohol causes throat, mouth, esophageal and breast cancers.
- 10. Bones:** Alcohol causes osteoporosis in men and women.
- 11. Diabetes:** An alcoholic's organs are often impaired, and glucose levels are uncontrolled, leading to diabetes.
- 12. Unhealthy Weight:** Alcohol in excess causes both weight gain and weight loss depending on the person's habits such as eating and energy levels during and after episodes of drinking and their overall health.
- 13. Eyesight:** Vision issues like long term blurry, double or optical nerve damage are related to alcoholism.



Alcohol depresses the central nervous system and slows down the neurotransmitter GABA; this causes sluggish movement, slurred speech, and slower reactions. If a person has a mental condition like depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, or PTSD, alcohol will exacerbate these disorders and may cause severe effects on the brain long term.

Alcohol's Effects on the Brain

1. Alcohol shrinks the brain
2. Causes decreased gray matter
3. Impairs memories
4. Inhibits mental performance (learning, memory, recollection, processing)
5. Behavioral changes (anger frustration, moodiness)
6. Hallucinations
7. Slurred speech (short and long term)
8. Social withdrawal
9. Psychosis
10. Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome (alcohol-related dementia)
11. Interrupts Sleep
12. Sleep apnea (stop breathing)

A 2014 study in the Journal of Neurology showed that men who consumed more than two and a half drinks per day had cognitive decline six years earlier than those that do not drink or were moderate drinkers. In a similar study, women were more susceptible to cognitive dysfunction and damage than men were, and this typically began at an earlier age.

How Much is Too Much?

Many people can start and stop drinking via willpower and do so whenever they want. For example, having one glass of wine with dinner is fine for many people; it's when you try to have one glass, and it turns into two, or the whole bottle that should cause concern. The guidelines are one drink per day for women and two for men. The problem is those can quickly turn into needing multiple beverages on any given occasion, as the body and brain build up tolerance and feels as if it can handle more.

What are the Signs of Drinking too Much?

1. You can't stop at one glass
2. You drink alone
3. You keep your drinking a secret or hide how much you consume
4. You feel guilty about your drinking
5. You make excuses as to why you need to drink
6. You know you have an unhealthy relationship with alcohol

Doesn't Drinking Have Health Benefits?

The minimal health benefits of moderate drinking are still not as healthful as not drinking at all. It's actually better to not consume any liquor, wine or beer regularly. Abstaining from alcohol can reduce cardiovascular disorders, liver and pancreatic dysfunction, and certain cancers. It can also improve brain function, energy, and sleep, to name a few.

Reversing Damage

What happens if you've been drinking for an extended period of time? When you quit drinking, much of the damage and disorders, as mentioned earlier, can be reversed entirely. Don't wait any longer; get the help you need to be free from addiction and living the healthy lifestyle that you and your family deserve.



Riverside Recovery of Tampa Owners Elizabeth Stockton, Kirk Kirpatrick, and Elizabeth's daughter Graysen

Your New Life Starts Today

Riverside Recovery is an addiction treatment center for men and women, offering a full continuum of care for people suffering from addiction and co-occurring mental health disorders. The spa-like facility is modern, bright, and along with traditional methods, they offer a mind, body, and spirit healing journey that is unparalleled.

Riverside Recovery focuses on the long run, not just one stage of your recovery, providing multiple levels of care to help you move through treatment and prepare for independent life. Their programs include detox, residential, day/night and outpatient options, ensuring that you enter and leave treatment at the level of care that is best for you. Riverside Recovery's continuum of care is designed to provide everything you need to rebuild your health, restore your confidence, and create a foundation for lasting recovery.

To find out more, please visit rrtampa.com or call (813) 575-4171.



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