Binge drinking decreases memory and cognitive function in seniors

By ACSH Staff — July 19, 2012

As the Alzheimer’s Association International Conference 2012 in Vancouver, Canada wraps up today, we find ourselves inundated with new findings related to the disease. Among these were two studies revealing that binge drinking among older people increases the risk of cognitive decline and memory loss.

The first study, led by Dr. Iain Lang of the University of Exeter in England, followed 5,075 U.S. adults ages 65 and older for eight years and assessed their cognitive function and memory by means of a telephone survey. Binge drinking was defined as having four or more drinks on one occasion.

Results showed that 4.3 percent of men and 0.5 percent of women reported drinking heavily twice a month or more. These individuals were 2.5 times more likely to suffer cognitive and memory declines, compared to their similarly aged counterparts who did not binge-drink. Older people need to be aware, if they do binge-drink, of the risks, and they should change their behaviors, says Dr. Lang.

In the other, related study reported at the conference, researchers found that moderate alcohol consumption failed to protect the mental functions of older women although previous studies had reported that moderate drinking might decrease the risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, and premature death.

For this study, researchers followed 1,306 women aged 65 and older for 20 years and found that women who went from teetotal to drinking over the course of the study had a 200 percent increased risk of cognitive impairment, compared to non-drinkers.

And although it may seem counter-intuitive, those aged 65 and older actually binge-drink more frequently than any other age group. In fact, according to the results of a CDC study completed in January, one in six U.S. adults are binge-drinkers.

We have often made note of the benefits of moderate alcohol consumption; in fact, we have publications devoted to this fact, said ACSH’s Dr. Gilbert Ross. However, unfortunately, preserving mental function is not one of alcohol’s benefits, certainly not for older folks.
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