

Script – Print – Just say no to heavy drinking

While Dry January is ending, the topic of drinking alcohol is still making headlines.

Heavy drinking habits among adults that started during the COVID-19 pandemic haven't slowed down, according to a recent study.

The study, published in the [Annals of Internal Medicine](#), found that alcohol use among adults ages 18 and older increased by 4% from 2018 to 2020, with heavy alcohol use increasing by a whopping 20%. Researchers say the increase continued in 2022.

The pandemic caused plenty of stress for people – working from home, remote learning for children and just plain boredom. Experts say alcohol can start as a habit and then become an addiction. It's also a way to cope with problems and issues that are impacting our daily lives.

"COVID was a very stressful time for a lot of people," says Jessey Mathew, MD, a primary care physician for OSF HealthCare. "There was a lot of social isolation, and a lot of emotional turmoil. People lost their friends; they lost family members. There were no outdoor activities, and alcohol became a relief from all these problems."

The study defined heavy drinking as five drinks a day or 15 drinks a week for men and four drinks a day or eight drinks a week for women. The increase was seen in all age groups, genders, races and regions in the U.S. except for Asian Americans and Native Americans. Adults in their 40s had the biggest increase in consumption.

"It depends on the type of alcohol and your rate of metabolism, which might be different for each person," says Dr. Mathew. "It also depends on how much you're drinking at the time. Are you binge drinking? Are you mixing it with other drinks? Are you mixing it with other substances or other drugs? There's a variety of reasons."

There are many risks with heavy drinking. Among the potential health problems include heart disease and cancer, as well as anxiety, depression, the risk of accidents, and social, family, legal and behavioral issues. "Alcohol affects everything, basically, from head to toe, every single organ can be affected by alcohol," says Dr. Mathew.

The earlier people start drinking, the greater the risk of developing health issues later in life. And women are more prone to get sicker from alcohol, according to Dr. Mathew. "There's a study that says that if you have one extra drink a day, it puts you at a risk of five to nine times more likely of getting breast cancer," she says. "It also increases your risk of infertility, menstrual problems, osteoporosis or weakening of your bones, which leads to fractures."

Dr. Mathew offers several ways to reduce alcohol consumption, including:

- Avoiding triggers such as people, places or activities that lead to heavy drinking
- Create ways to deal with stress such as exercise, walking, reading
- Limit the amount of alcohol you have in your home
- Find hobbies that don't involve alcohol
- Seek support from friends and family or co-workers

Dr. Mathew adds that if you start feeling guilty about drinking, find yourself becoming easily agitated, or drinking at odd times of the day, it might be time to seek professional help. For more information on behavioral health services, visit the OSF HealthCare [website](#).