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Heavy Drinking Is Linked to Obesity in U.S. Adults

A JAMA Internal Medicine analysis found the association across demographic groups, widening concern over alcohol’s health risks.

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A new analysis in JAMA Internal Medicine found that heavy drinking and alcohol use disorder were linked with obesity in U.S. adults, adding to evidence that alcohol-related health risks extend beyond liver disease and addiction.

The study examined national survey data and looked at patterns of body weight among adults who reported heavy alcohol use or met criteria for alcohol use disorder. Researchers found that people in those groups were more likely to have obesity than adults without those drinking patterns. The association held across several demographic groups, suggesting that the relationship was not limited to one age range, sex or racial group.

The findings matter because obesity and alcohol misuse are both common and often treated as separate public health problems. When they occur together, they can raise the risk of diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease and some cancers. They can also make treatment more complicated, since clinicians may need to address nutrition, drinking behavior and other chronic conditions at the same time.

The study adds to a growing body of research showing that alcohol can affect weight in different ways. Alcohol contains calories, can increase appetite and may change how the body stores fat. Heavy drinking can also disrupt sleep and lower physical activity, which may contribute to weight gain over time.

Public health experts have long warned that alcohol use disorder is underdiagnosed and undertreated. The new findings suggest that obesity screening could offer another opportunity for doctors to ask about drinking habits and identify patients who may need help earlier.

The research comes as U.S. health officials continue to examine the broader effects of alcohol on chronic disease, including whether current drinking guidelines adequately reflect long-term risks tied to cancer, cardiovascular disease and metabolic illness.