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Study Looks at Link Between Alcohol, Spouse Abuse

Violence can continue years after drinking subsides, research says

By E.J. Mundell, HealthDay Reporter

WEDNESDAY, Dec. 15 (HealthDayNews) – While heavy drinking does raise the risk for spousal abuse, it’s probably not the prime cause of abusive behavior in drinking men.

Data on more than 30,000 male U.S. Army soldiers stretching back 13 years suggests abuse often continues even after drinking levels have declined, researchers say in a new study.

“A lot of people will age out of heavy drinking, but they aren’t aging out of whatever these other behaviors are,” said Nicole Bell, a longtime researcher into issues of alcoholism and abuse, and vice president of Boston-based Social Sectors Development Strategies Inc.

The study appears in the December issue of *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research*.

Conventional wisdom suggests that problem drinking, drunkenness and abusive behavior are inextricably linked, but, according to Bell, an exact cause-and-effect relationship between them remains unclear.

“It’s just been difficult to separate some of those factors,” she said. Bell said increased rates of depression among heavy drinkers may be partially to blame, but it doesn’t “fully explain” links between drinking and abuse.

In their study, Bell and her colleagues examined data from 1991 to 1998 on self-reported drinking, as well as incidents of domestic violence, among more than 30,000 enlisted soldiers.

Bell stressed that she focused on soldiers primarily because of the quality and breadth of data made available by Army statisticians. “We were able to have a huge population of people -- lots of data for a long period of time,” she said. “Army rates [for drinking and abuse] are probably comparable to civilian rates after adjusting for differences in age and race,” she added.

As expected, drinking was strongly related to increased risk for domestic violence. Men classified as the heaviest drinkers – 22 or more drinks per week – were 66 percent more likely to

abuse their partners, compared to men who described themselves as non-drinkers, the researchers found.

Heavy drinkers (15 to 20 drinks per week) and moderate drinkers (eight to 14 drinks per week) were also three times as likely to report beating their partner while intoxicated, compared to men consuming less than one drink per week. Even light drinking – one to seven drinks per week – doubled the rate of abuse while intoxicated.

Connections between alcohol use and domestic abuse remained even after drinkers cut down on their consumption or quit altogether, Bell added.

“We were able to find links between people who said they were heavy drinkers five years ago, and increased risks for spouse abuse now – five years after,” she said. According to Bell, this might mean that abuse counselors “may need to take a careful look at [a client’s] past history of alcohol problems,” not current drinking patterns.

Bell said the findings suggest alcohol dependence and abusive behavior may share common roots, but she also noted the two problems don’t always go hand-in-hand.

“Actually, in the majority of cases where there’s spousal abuse, neither the victim nor the perpetrator were drinking,” she pointed out. “So even though there’s an association, drinking is not causal and it’s not always necessary – not everybody who drinks heavily is going to beat their wives, and not everybody who beats their wives up drinks.”

Experts acknowledge, however, that treating problem drinking usually reduces spousal abuse.

“Many people think you can’t do anything about heavy drinking,” said Dr. Gordon Smith, of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. “But there are clearly studies that show that if you can screen and identify people with problem drinking and get them into early treatment, then you can significantly reduce the consequences of their drinking, including spousal abuse.”

Smith stressed that “treatment for alcoholism or problem drinking has similar effectiveness to that for other chronic diseases, like asthma and diabetes.”

More information

To learn more about preventing spousal abuse, visit the U.S. Department of Justice at <http://www.usdoj.gov/>.

SOURCES: Nicole Bell, D.Sc., vice president, Social Sectors Development Strategies Inc., Boston; Gordon Smith, M.D., M.P.H., associate professor, public health, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore; December 2004 *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research*

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