

## **12 Health Risks of Chronic Heavy Drinking**

### **1. Anemia**

Heavy drinking can cause the number of oxygen-carrying red blood cells to be abnormally low. This condition, known as anemia, can trigger a host of symptoms, including fatigue, shortness of breath, and lightheadedness.

### **2. Cancer**

Habitual drinking increases the risk of cancer. Scientists believe the increased risk comes when the body converts alcohol into acetaldehyde, a potent carcinogen. Cancer sites linked to alcohol use include the mouth, pharynx (throat), larynx (voice box), esophagus, liver, breast, and colorectal region. Cancer risk rises even higher in heavy drinkers who also use tobacco.

### **3. Cardiovascular disease**

Heavy drinking, especially bingeing makes platelets more likely to clump together into blood clots, which can lead to heart attack or stroke. Harvard researchers found that binge drinking doubled the risk of death among people who initially survived a heart attack.

### **4. Cirrhosis**

Alcohol is toxic to liver cells, and many heavy drinkers develop cirrhosis, a sometimes-lethal condition in which the liver is so heavily scarred that it is unable to function. But it's hard to predict which drinkers will develop cirrhosis. Some people who drink huge amounts never get cirrhosis, and some who don't drink very much do get it. For some unknown reason, women seem to be especially vulnerable.

### **5. Dementia**

As people age, their brains shrink, on average, at a rate of about 1.9% per decade. That's considered normal. But heavy drinking speeds the shrinkage of certain key regions in the brain, resulting in memory loss and other symptoms of dementia.

### **6. Depression**

It's long been known that heavy drinking often goes hand in hand with depression, but there has been debate about which came first -- the drinking or the depression. One theory is that depressed people turned to alcohol in an attempt to "self-medicate" to ease their emotional pain. But a large study from New Zealand showed that it was probably the other way around -- that is, heavy drinking led to depression.

Research has also shown that depression improves when heavy drinkers go on the wagon.

## **7. Seizures**

Heavy drinking can cause epilepsy and can trigger seizures even in people who don't have epilepsy. It can also interfere with the action of the medications used to treat convulsions.

## **8. Gout**

A painful condition, gout is caused by the formation of uric acid crystals in the joints. Although some cases are largely hereditary, alcohol and other dietary factors seem to play a role. Alcohol also seems to aggravate existing cases of gout.

## **9. High blood pressure**

Heavy drinking -- and bingeing, in particular -- can cause blood pressure to rise. Over time, this effect can become chronic. High blood pressure can lead to many other health problems, including kidney disease, heart disease, and stroke.

## **10. Infectious disease**

Heavy drinking suppresses the immune system, providing a toehold for infections, including tuberculosis, pneumonia, HIV/AIDS, and other sexually transmitted diseases. People who drink heavily also are more likely to engage in risky sex. "Heavy drinking is associated with a three-fold increase in the risk of contracting a sexually transmitted disease.

## **11. Nerve damage**

Heavy drinking can cause a form of nerve damage known as alcoholic neuropathy, which can produce a painful pins-and-needles feeling or numbness in the extremities as well as muscle weakness, incontinence, constipation, erectile dysfunction, and other problems. Alcoholic neuropathy may arise because alcohol is toxic to nerve cells.

## **12. Pancreatitis**

In addition to causing stomach irritation (gastritis), drinking can inflame the pancreas. Chronic pancreatitis interferes with the digestive process, causing severe abdominal pain and persistent diarrhea --and it's not fixable. Up to 60% stem from alcohol consumption.

