

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism: Longitudinal Study of Alcohol Use and Related Problems in Older Adults

This is a longitudinal survey of alcohol use and alcohol related problems in older adults. The subjects were aged 55 to 65 years when originally surveyed; they will be aged 75 to 86 years when the 21 year longitudinal follow-up survey is administered. Thus, the survey permits an examination of the natural course of drinking behaviors between young-old age and old-old age.

Lead Agency:

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism/ National Institutes of Health

Agency Mission:

NIAAA provides leadership in the national effort to reduce alcohol-related problems by:

- Conducting and supporting research in a wide range of scientific areas including genetics, neuroscience, epidemiology, health risks and benefits of alcohol consumption, prevention, and treatment;
- Coordinating and collaborating with other research institutes and Federal Programs on alcohol-related issues;
- Collaborating with international, national, state, and local institutions, organizations, agencies, and programs engaged in alcohol-related work;
- Translating and disseminating research findings to health care providers, researchers, policymakers, and the public.

Principal Investigator:

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General Description:

Longitudinal Study of Alcohol Use and Related Problems in Older Adults

The purpose of this research is to describe the long-term course of late-life problem drinking and to examine how health and help-seeking, life context and coping, and gender and family factors influence late-life drinking careers. Specifically, the applicants propose to extend an NIAAA-funded 10-year study of late-life problem drinking to 21 years in order to determine the course of older adults' alcohol consumption and problem drinking as they move from being young-old (55 to 65 years at baseline) to being old-old

(75 to 86 years at follow-up). Guided by a stress and coping model, the investigators will focus on four sets of issues: (1) They will examine the 21-year course of late-life alcohol consumption and problem drinking and identify high-risk patterns of alcohol consumption and the predictive validity of alternative alcohol consumption guidelines. In addition, they will focus on the rates and predictors of new late-life drinking problems and of remission, and consider the consequences of late-life drinking problems and remission, including whether stably remitted problem drinkers' functioning and life contexts normalize over time or whether there is permanent "scarring" associated with prior drinking problems. (2) They will examine health-related factors, such as medical conditions, medication use, pain, and depression and suicidal ideation, in relation to fluctuations in late-life drinking patterns. They will also focus on late-life and the lifetime history of help-seeking for alcohol-related and personal problems, as well as natural recovery of drinking problems. (3) They will consider the role of social context and coping, including friends and social resources, and life history factors, in fluctuations in late-life alcohol consumption, drinking problems, and remission and relapse. Finally, (4) they will examine gender and current family influences on the course of late-life problem drinking. By spotlighting the extent of at-risk drinking, late-onset problem drinking, and relapse among adults of advanced age, this research should help health care providers more readily recognize the existence and potential for drinking problems among their oldest patients. By providing insight into reasons adults at this life stage do or do not seek help for drinking problems, and patterns of help-seeking predictive of more favorable drinking outcomes, the research may help to provide the scientific underpinnings to promote development of more accessible and effective alcohol prevention programs for older adults.

Excellence: What makes this project exceptional?

Because the proportion of older people who drink is small and the amounts drunk by older people are typically small, there is a limited amount of useful epidemiological research on alcohol use in later life. This study will be one of the few alcohol studies focusing on older age groups. Also, the study's longitudinal design permits a rare opportunity to examine changes in drinking behavior as individual's transition between relatively young old age and older old age.

Significance: How is this research relevant to older persons, populations and/or an aging society?

This study is examining such important issues as: (a) the high risk patterns of drinking are over time; (b) the predictive validity of alternative alcohol consumption guidelines; (c) whether stable remission leads to normalization of life functioning, or whether there is permanent "scarring"; (d) long term health outcomes such as medical conditions, medication use, depression and suicidal ideation related to changes in drinking behavior; (e) the natural histories of help seeking and natural remission, and the role of social contexts, both concurrent and past, as well as of later life drinking adaptations. These data do not currently exist in any other prospective study, and this project has the potential to provide new findings of special import, given the increasing aging of the U.S. population.

Effectiveness: What is the impact and/or application of this research to older persons?

Considering the aging of the American population, sound epidemiological information about drinking on later life will provide the critical basis for planning the health care needs of older Americans, recognizing the unique patterns of problems that attend on alcohol use in older age, developing age-appropriate screening and brief intervention tools, and ensuring the availability of sufficient treatment capacity for these individuals.

Innovativeness: Why is this research exciting or newsworthy?

Again, the key element in innovativeness is the lack of comparable information from any other available sources. Although the research techniques are standard ones, they have not been applied to this segment of the population in previous research.