

Alcohol linked to early-onset dementia

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Experts worry the figures may reflect an increase in binge drinking among young people.

New research suggests up to a fifth of all cases of early-onset dementia could be alcohol related, nearly twice the figure suggested by earlier estimates.

Drug and alcohol experts say the figures are a worry and may reflect an increase in binge drinking among young people.

They say too many people underestimate the long-term health effects of alcohol abuse.

Dr Adrienne Withall from the Dementia Collaborative Research Centre study from the University of NSW says the growth may be partly due to increased awareness of the problem, but it is just as likely that higher alcohol consumption is to blame.

She says studies done across hospitals in NSW of people with young onset dementia suggest about 20 per cent of cases are alcohol-related compared to a rate of 10 per cent in the United Kingdom 10 years ago.

Dr Withall says it is clear there is a link between sustained drinking and increased incidence of early-onset dementia.

However, she says the link between binge drinking and dementia is less obvious.

"We're talking really about sustained drinking. I think given the increasing prevalence for people to binge drink, we just don't know enough about what it's going to do in the future," she said.

"But when it comes to sustained drinking and the kind of daily drinking, we're talking about for men around about 35 standard drinks a week and for women about 28 standard drinks a week over a period of about five years."

Australian National Council on Drugs chairman Dr John Herron says he agrees more research is needed, but says binge drinking is the most likely cause.

"Alcohol's basically a poison. It affects the liver and it also affects the brain, but it diffuses the brain," he said.

"When you get strokes or blood vessel clotting occurring in the brain, that part of the brain is affected.

"Another part of the brain can take over the function of that other [part] - this is called neuroplasticity - but with alcohol it affects all brain cells."

Dr Herron says research has shown that while alcohol affects some parts of the brain more frequently than others it does affect the whole of the brain.