

Newsflash

Issue 2021.12

For Older Drivers, Impairment May Start With One Drink

If you're an older adult, a single glass of wine, a bottle of beer or one mixed drink probably won't put you over the legal intoxication limit, but it can affect your driving ability nonetheless, suggests a study published in *Pharmacotherapy*. Thirty-six people, ages 25 to 35, and 36 adults, ages 55 to 70, took a simulated driving test while alcohol-free to gauge their ability to stay in the center of their lane, maintain a constant speed and use the steering wheel. The participants later repeated the test after imbibing either a placebo, a drink strong enough to produce a 0.04 percent breath-alcohol level or one that gave them a 0.065 percent level (the legal intoxication level is 0.08 percent). The researchers found that alcohol consumption had no effect on the younger group's driving abilities, whereas the older adults who had consumed alcohol drove more slowly and performed more poorly on measures of driving precision.

The take home message:

Adults over age 65 who consume alcohol should limit themselves to no more than one standard drink a day, equating to one 12-ounce bottle of beer or wine cooler, one 5-ounce glass of wine, or 1½ ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits. However, the results of this study suggest that even if you have only one drink, consider handing over your keys to someone who hasn't been imbibing.



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Brain-Training Strategies Could Help You Stay Independent as You Age

Surveys suggest that about 90 percent of older adults want to live independently for as long as possible, and certain research points to cognitive training methods that may help you achieve that. Samuel Gandy, MD, associate director of Mount Sinai's Alzheimer's Disease Research Center, notes that the study is among the first to show that cognitive training actually translates to improvements in daily functioning. These improvements may help seniors maintain their independence, since delaying the onset of cognitive impairment by as little as five or six years would greatly reduce the number of people affected with dementia. However, he adds that a replication study is required to confirm the results.

The study looked at how three brain training programs (focusing on processing speed, memory and reasoning ability) affected 2,832 cognitively normal participants as they aged. They were divided into a control group and three intervention groups focusing on different mental skills:

Memory. Remembering word lists, sequences of items, and main ideas/details in stories.

Reasoning. The ability to solve problems that follow patterns, a skill that aids in activities such as reading bus schedules or filling out order forms.

Speed of processing. The ability to identify and locate visual information quickly, which is useful for looking up phone numbers, and reacting to changes in traffic when driving.

Significant Improvements

Training consisted of 10 60- to 75-minute sessions over five to six weeks. Ten years later, participants in each intervention group reported having less difficulty with instrumental activities of daily living, such as taking medications, cooking, and managing their finances. About 60 percent of trained participants compared with 50 percent of controls were at or above their starting level of function regarding these daily tasks. Memory performance improved for up to five years following the intervention, but there was no longer a significant difference between trained participants and controls at 10 years. However, participants in the reasoning and speed-of-processing groups still showed significant improvements relative to controls in the trained skills even at 10 years. "Booster" training at 11 and at 35 months after the initial sessions produced additional improvements.

Simple Methods to Try

One of the training programs used in the study (speed of processing training), is now commercially available from Posit Science (www.positscience.com), and an online version of the memory-training program is currently in development. But Dr. Gandy says you don't necessarily have to use the programs in order to benefit from these study findings.

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Reduce Foot Pain

If you're like most people, during the holidays you spend hours every day on your feet cooking, shopping, decorating, etc. So taking care of your feet should be a top priority. Foot pain is not normal at any age. If your feet hurt, find out why and what you can do about it. Otherwise, you may end up with limited mobility that can restrict your activities.

While a foot or ankle problem rarely is life-threatening, it definitely is lifestyle-threatening. Getting the right diagnosis and treatment can literally put you back on your feet. In addition, the feet also affect other parts of the body. For example, having a high arch or flat arch is a risk for developing problems and pain in the lower leg, knee, hip and back. People with pain in those areas often need to have their feet evaluated, as well as the site of the pain.

Common types of foot pain. The heel is a common area for pain. The foot makes contact with the ground 10,000 to 15,000 times a day in a very active person, and that constant repetitive motion can take a toll. Heel pain is particularly common among people who suddenly increase their activity or don't wear footwear appropriate for the activity they are engaging in.

Heel pain is often associated with such conditions as Achilles tendinitis (inflammation of the tendon that attaches the calf muscles to the heel) and a heel spur (a protrusion on the underside of the heel bone that can intrude into the soft tissue, causing irritation and pain).

The plantar fascia, a large, fibrous band that runs along the bottom of the foot, is also a common site of pain. Inflammation of the plantar fascia (plantar fasciitis) can lead to Achilles tendinitis as well as posterior tibial tendinitis, which can cause pain on the inner side of the foot and ankle.

Tendons are especially vulnerable after age 40, when the blood supply to these connective tissues decreases significantly. When there's less blood supply, there's also less elasticity, and even small tears take longer to heal.

Prevention and treatment. You can help prevent foot pain by strengthening your feet and regularly stretching your tendons and ligaments. Walking is the best strengthening exercise, because it puts a tremendous amount of stress and force on the foot. Wearing appropriate footwear – socks, activity-specific shoes in the correct size, and recommended insert or orthotic – can help protect the feet during walking or any other activity.

I'm also a strong believer in stretching the Achilles tendon in the morning before you get out of bed. That stretch also is good for the plantar fascia and the posterior tibial tendon. Avoid other foot exercises except under the advice and guidance of a foot health professional. If you have foot pain for more than a few days, especially if it restricts your activities, see a doctor.

The key to proper treatment is accurate diagnosis. Appropriate exercises, inserts/orthotics, or an ultrasound guided cortisone injections are common pain-relieving strategies. Surgery should be considered **when all else fails**.



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Brain-Training Strategies...

Memorize the items on your grocery list before you go to the store, then avoid referring to the list unless absolutely necessary. A good tip for success with this is to divide your list into logical groups – for example, apples, cucumbers, paper, ink, cabbage, bananas, grapes, beans, stapler, oranges, can be better learned by rearranging them into a list of four fruits, three vegetables, and three stationery items.

Another thing you can do is to place eight to ten assorted items on a tray, then cover them with a cloth and try to recall what they were. Also practice mentally solving mathematical problems without using a calculator, or read a newspaper or magazine article and then summarize the main points for your spouse or a friend. Anything you can do to challenge yourself mentally may help give your brain a boost.



Cold-Weather Skin Soothers

Whether it's simple dry skin or a specific skin condition, try these tips.

- ❖ Turn down the thermostat a few degrees. It may keep the air from drying out as much, and cooler air is less likely to aggravate your skin.
- ❖ Bathe briefly and use tepid water. The hotter the water, the more skin oils you strip away.
- ❖ Moisturize after bathing, while you're slightly damp. Use a product that's fragrance-free, hypoallergenic, or made for sensitive skin.
- ❖ Run a cool-mist humidifier. Or place pans of water near heating vents to moisten indoor air. Humidity should be 30 to 60 percent (40 to 50 percent if you have allergies or asthma)
- ❖ Stick to fragrance-free soaps. Also use detergents made for sensitive skin.