

Alcohol may cause long-term memory issues

By Melinda Beck, Wall Street Journal

Here's a sobering thought for the holidays: Chronic heavy drinking can cause insidious damage to the brain, even in people who never seem intoxicated or obviously addicted.

Experts say alcohol-related brain damage is underdiagnosed and often confused with Alzheimer's disease, other forms of dementia or just getting older.

Now, brain imaging is revealing how long-term alcohol abuse can change the structure of the brain, shrinking gray-matter cells in areas that govern learning, memory, decision-making and social behavior, as well as damaging white-matter fibers that connect one part of the brain with others.

Long-term alcohol abuse also changes how the brain regulates emotion and anxiety and disrupts sleep systems, creating wide-ranging effects on the body. Increasingly, clinicians are diagnosing "alcohol-induced neurocognitive disorder" and "alcohol-related dementia."

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