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Third of Americans Have Alcohol Problems at Some Point

Treatment often delayed or not sought, experts say

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MONDAY, July 2 (HealthDay News) -- More than 30 percent of Americans say they have had problems with alcohol, a new study shows.

Among those with drinking problems, 17.8 percent say they have alcohol abuse problems, and 12.5 percent are alcohol-dependent, according to the report in the July issue of the *Archives of General Psychiatry*.

"At some time in a person's life, 30 percent of the population in the United States will develop alcohol dependence or alcohol abuse," said lead researcher Bridget F. Grant, chief of the Laboratory of Epidemiology and Biometry at the U.S. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

The hallmarks of alcohol abuse are interpersonal problems, financial problems and problems in daily living due to excessive drinking, Grant said. Alcohol dependence is more serious, she said. "That's where a person has a compulsion to drink as well as impaired control," she explained.

Grant noted that another major finding in the study is that there is an eight- to 10-year delay in treatment for alcohol problems after the problem starts. "That 10 years can be devastating," she said.

In addition, there is a big treatment gap, Grant said. "Only 24 percent of people who had alcohol dependence are ever treated," she said.

There are many new medications and behavioral treatments, Grant said. "But most people, including physicians, don't realize the new state-of-the-art treatment," she said. "Basically, we need a national campaign to educate physicians and lay people that there are treatments out there, and they are effective."

In the study, Grant's team analyzed data on 43,093 U.S. adults. The data were collected from interviews done between 2001 and 2002. In the interviews, people were asked about symptoms of alcohol abuse and dependence and diagnosed for depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorders, substance abuse disorder and other psychiatric problems.

In the year before the interview, 8.5 percent of adults reported having an alcohol use disorder, including 4.7 percent with alcohol abuse and 3.8 percent who were alcohol-dependent, Grant's group found.

In addition, of those who had alcohol dependence during their lifetime, only 24.1 percent were ever treated. Of those who were alcohol-dependent in the year before the study, only 12.1 percent received treatment during that time, the researchers found.

For those with alcohol problems, the prevalence is higher among men and Native Americans, Grant said. "Asians, Hispanics and blacks have a lower prevalence than whites," she added. "Alcohol abuse is greatest among those in the

30- to 60-year-old age range."

While these data remain mostly unchanged over the years, Grant is disappointed that the number of people being treated for alcohol problems remains the same. "More people need to be gotten into treatment and into treatment sooner," she said.

One expert thinks lack of awareness of alcohol problems and treatment options remains a serious problem.

"There is not so much new data here but rather an update on findings that we've known about for some time....," said Dr. James Garbutt, a professor of psychiatry at the University of North Carolina.

Most troubling is that only about 24 percent of those with alcohol dependence receive treatment, Garbutt noted. "The findings speak to the continued lack of adequate awareness and treatment of these disorders and the devastating consequences this has for public health," he said.

Another expert agreed that the gap in treatment is the most serious issue highlighted by the study.

"The most important finding of this study is the lack of progress in improving delivery of treatment to individuals with alcohol-use disorders," said Dr. Adam Bisaga, an assistant professor of psychiatry at Columbia University and addiction psychiatrist at the New York State Psychiatric Institute, both in New York City.

"This occurs despite significant advances in research describing brain abnormalities contributing to the development and maintenance of alcoholism and availability of several medications and psychotherapies that are effective in reducing burden of these frequently occurring disorders," Bisaga said.

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