

Drinkers less likely to suffer dementia

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It has long been claimed that alcohol is good for the heart. Now there is evidence that it may be good for the head too, at least if you are reasonably well off. Middle-class people who have a few drinks a day are less likely to suffer dementia in old age than those who are teetotal, a study claims.

Researchers found that those who had up to three drinks on most days were twice as likely to make it to 85 without developing dementia than those who did not drink at all. The effect was noticeable even after other lifestyle and health factors had been taken into account.

"This study is unique because we considered men and women's cognitive health at late age and found that alcohol consumption is not only associated with reduced mortality, but with greater chances of remaining cognitively healthy into older age," Linda McEvoy, an associate professor at the medical school and one of the authors, said.

The authors added, however, that the reasons may be socioeconomic. Those who drank frequently and moderately, particularly wine, tended to be wealthier and better educated with better access to healthcare, less likely to smoke and less likely to suffer mental illness, the report suggested.

Public health experts in Britain also warned that the results should not be taken as a sign to start drinking to

improve brain health. The researchers, from the University of California San Diego School of Medicine, tracked 728 women and 616 men, 99 per cent of whom were white, from Rancho Bernardo, a white-collar, middle to upper middle-class suburb in San Diego County, from 1984 to 2013.

The group's cognitive health was assessed every four years and screened using a standard test known as the mini mental state examination. They were asked to report how often and how much they drank.

The researchers concluded that moderate to heavy drinkers, who consumed alcohol five to seven days a week, were twice as likely to be cognitively healthy as non-drinkers.

Erin Richard, a lead author, said: "This study shows that moderate drinking may be part of a healthy lifestyle to maintain cognitive fitness in ageing. However, it is not a recommendation for everyone to drink. Some people have health problems that are made worse by alcohol."

David Reynolds, chief scientific officer at Alzheimer's Research UK, warned that the study was narrow and limited to wealthy white Americans. "[It] only looked at people's alcohol intake at one point in time, and so does not account for drinking habits earlier in life, which could have influenced the findings," he added.

The study is published in the *Journal of Alzheimer's Disease*.