

UW Health: Seeing Trends of Increased Liver Disease in Young Adults

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Contact: Sara Vinson, (608) 852-2605, svinson@uwhealth.org

MADISON, Wis. – Experts at UW Health are seeing a significant rise in liver disease in young people, particularly young women.

Liver disease and cirrhosis –significant scarring in the liver– are caused by conditions such as viral hepatitis, non-alcoholic fatty liver disease, and frequently by heavy alcohol use.

With this increase in liver disease and cirrhosis, mortality rates from these conditions are also climbing. They are skyrocketing in men and women ages 25-34, according to experts, which is entirely driven by alcohol-associated liver disease and rising rates of alcohol use disorder.

Liver diseases have been increasing over the last decade, alongside a steady increase in alcohol consumption. Plus, drinking historically spikes around times of trauma and stress, such as the Great Recession, natural disasters, and now the COVID-19 pandemic.

“This trend is extremely concerning to those of us treating advanced liver disease,” said Dr. Rita German, transplant hepatologist, UW Health. “When we see people drinking more alcohol at a younger age, we are also watching more young people develop – and die from – cirrhosis.”

One study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association reported people have been drinking 14% more during the pandemic. Women have been

drinking 17% more than pre-pandemic levels. The study also found a staggering 41% increase in reported binge drinking in women (drinking ³4 drinks at a time). While health experts say men can safely have two drinks a day or about 14 drinks per week, women should have no more than one drink per day, or seven per week.

Dr. German encourages people to be mindful of alcohol consumption, especially if they've noticed drinking more since the pandemic began. While a glass of wine with dinner is not typically enough to cause the liver damage she sees in her work with advanced liver disease, reducing the alcohol you consume can have positive impacts on your health. For those concerned about the amount of alcohol they consume, she says it is vitally important to reach out to your health care provider.

"We as health care providers want to identify unhealthy levels of alcohol use as early as possible before patients develop liver disease," said Dr. German. "We can support you with alcohol cessation resources, treatment centers, mental health professionals and of course medical interventions, but the earlier we know the better."

UW Health is in the process of creating a multidisciplinary clinic for the treatment of alcohol-associated liver disease and alcohol use disorder to combat these concerning trends.

Video and interviews with Dr. Rita German are available.