

Men's Health



Bottoms up . . . many heavy drinkers are in trouble at work and at home and suffer from depression.

Photo: ANDREW QUILTY

Blackouts: can't remember if you've a drink problem

Jill Margo

Being a seasoned drinker will not protect you from having an alcoholic blackout. Neither will age. The notion that only young, inexperienced drinkers have blackouts has been exposed as a myth.

A study has shown that more than half the Australian men who drink very heavily experience a blackout — the temporary loss of memory — at least once a week.

They either have a total blackout, during which they remember nothing, or fragmentary blackouts, during which they remember parts of what happened.

Having a blackout is different to passing out. When you pass out, you simply fall asleep after having too much to drink — and when you wake, you remember that you passed out. But when you black out, it's an amnesiac experience.

Sitharthan Thiagarajan, director of the Australian Centre for Addiction Research, who conducted the study, says after a total blackout, a man will typically say: "I have absolutely no recollection of what happened between 6pm and 8pm last night and I don't know how I got home."

He won't be fudging, he'll be telling the truth and he may even have driven himself home.

The man who has had a fragmentary blackout will have gaps in his memory and will typically say: "Yes, I do remember talking to you last night, but I can't remember what we discussed. Did I really suggest dancing on the table?"

Thiagarajan, who is also associate professor of psychological medicine at the University of Sydney, says this sort of behaviour is scary and has "huge health and psycho-social implications".

He conducted the study on more than 1000 heavy-drinking men and women who came asking for help. The men were having an average of nine standard drinks a day, mostly in the form of beer or wine.

Nine standard drinks is equivalent to six full-strength beers or just under 1½ bottles of wine.

Most of the men had relationship, work or health problems, and they all wanted to cut down their alcohol consumption.

"These were not people who sit on a park bench with a brown paper bag. These were people like me," Thiagarajan says.

Most of the men were in their 40s, were married, employed, owned their own homes and had tertiary education.

He says alcoholic blackouts are a scientific mystery. "We don't really understand exactly what happens in the brain during a blackout. We do know that alcohol somehow manages to undermine our efforts to form new memories at the time, so that later, when we try and recall what happened, we can't remember.

"It was previously thought alcohol-induced memory disruption was more common in younger people who drank too fast, had an empty stomach, or were naive, novice drinkers. But our study shows it affects older people too."

"These were not people who sit on a park bench with a brown paper bag. These were people like me."

Sitharthan Thiagarajan, Australian Centre for Addiction Research

Among seasoned heavy drinkers, he says, the brain may even anticipate a blackout and almost program itself to have one, especially if they are happening as regularly as once a week. Eventually, the man becomes accustomed to not remembering if he drinks excessively.

An "expectation factor" is at work too. One study gave people non-alcoholic drinks but told them they contained alcohol. They were in a bar drinking with others who had genuine alcoholic drinks. Later, neither those with the real drinks nor those with the dummy drinks could remember exactly what happened.

Other factors, like an empty stomach or certain mood states, can also prompt a blackout. A man who feels very depressed will drink in the hope of wiping out his misery. In the process it

will wipe out some of his memory too.

Every time a middle-aged adult has a blackout, he knocks out a few brain cells and like boxing, it is slow and cumulative. Each blackout is a blow to the brain, unless he is young and abstains for long enough for the brain to recuperate.

Thiagarajan says a two-hour total blackout is chaotic for the brain.

"Imagine if electricity to a major city was cut off two hours every week and there were no traffic lights, elevators, trains, lights. The disruption would be chaotic. So it is in the brain."

His study found about a quarter of the men were having a total blackout once a week and a further 21 per cent were having one at least once a month.

The situation was worse with fragmentary blackouts. About 37 per cent had one once a week and almost 48 per cent had an episode monthly.

Previous US research has shown that after a fragmentary blackout, binge drinkers tend to fill in the missing gaps with unrealistically positive memories. Some, for example, believe alcohol made them more sociable, sexually attractive or assertive — increasing the likelihood that they would continue bingeing.

But for seasoned drinkers, like those in Thiagarajan's study, the outcome was already tough on many fronts. A quarter were struggling in their jobs. In the past six months, they'd called in sick a few times or had been unable to function properly while at work.

About four out of every 10 acknowledged their relationships were in difficulty, while three out of 10 admitted they had health problems that needed attention.

And drinking didn't make them happy. More than 30 per cent of them were suffering from anxiety or depression and 10 per cent had thought about killing themselves in the past six months.

■ *The Controlled Drinking by Correspondence Program can be contacted by calling 1800 006 577. It is free and confidential. There is no face to face contact. Participants get assessed by mail and receive a mailing once a fortnight for eight weeks with strategies and tips on cutting down.*