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## Booze and smokes a natural match?

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[JOSEPH HALL](#)

STAFF REPORTER

They're twin vices that have been joined at the lips for centuries.

But now scientists think they know one reason why smoking and drinking are so often associated with each other.

A paper sponsored by the U.S. National Institutes of Health, released today, suggests smoking actually allows people to drink more beer, wine or liquor without getting drunk.

But if — as is often the case — the goal of drinking is to get intoxicated, then smoking will make people drink more in pursuit of a buzz, researchers say.

"Cigarette smoking appears to promote the consumption of alcohol," says Wei-Jung Chen of the Texas A&M Health Science Centre.

"Since the desired effects of alcohol are significantly diminished by nicotine ... this may encourage drinkers to drink more to achieve the pleasurable or expected effect," said Chen, a neuroscience researcher at the school and lead study author, in a press briefing.

The study, released in the journal *Alcoholism, Clinical & Experimental Research*, was conducted on drunken rats and showed a marked reduction in their blood-alcohol concentrations in the presence of nicotine, says NIH scientist Susan Maier.

Maier, a Kitchener-area native, says some of the dampening effects of nicotine on rodent intoxication would almost certainly be paralleled in humans. And this could help explain why smoking levels increase in bar and party settings, she said. "It's suggestive that there's definitely a link between smoking and drinking and perhaps drinking more in smokers," Maier said in an interview.

Simply put, she says, smokers need to drink more to get intoxicated.

Wende Wood, a psychiatric pharmacist with Toronto's Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, expressed surprise at the study, saying its findings of reduced blood-alcohol concentrations were unexpected.

Wood says the fact that alcohol is a depressant and nicotine a stimulant might suggest the two could have a levelling effect on each other.



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"My assumption would have been, with the nicotine being a stimulant, that might counteract some of the (alcohol's) sedation effect, but the blood alcohol would stay the same," Wood says.

"But this study says that the nicotine ... seems to actually affect the blood-alcohol content, which was quite a surprise to me."

Maier says it's unclear what mechanism is allowing the nicotine to reduce blood alcohol levels, which were knocked down by as much as 52 per cent. But the study suggests it's likely related to the ability of nicotine to slow the passage of alcohol from the stomach to the intestines.

In the study, female rats were injected with varying levels of nicotine, the equivalents of which could be achieved in humans through smoking.

They were also injected with uniform levels of alcohol, either into their abdominal cavity, or directly into their stomachs. Only rats that had nicotine injections showed the lower blood-alcohol levels.

This suggests, Chen says, that nicotine slows the release of alcohol from the stomach into the intestines, where it is far more readily absorbed into the bloodstream.

"Nicotine appears to delay the emptying of stomach contents, including alcohol into the intestines, a major site for absorption," Chen says.

With some of the booze being absorbed more slowly into the bloodstream through the stomach, peak blood alcohol concentrations will be lower and drinkers will feel less intoxicated, Chen says.

However, Maier says, the increased alcohol intake will leave drinkers with far more toxic by-products in their system from the alcohol.

"This would be particularly harmful for adolescents and young adult drinkers, since these populations are amenable to this type of drinking pattern and may develop chronic alcohol-related diseases earlier in life because of it," she said.

Wood also says that other factors almost certainly contribute to the common pairing of smoking and drinking, which numerous studies have shown to be prevalent across the world.

She says, for example, that at least one study has suggested nicotine and alcohol might have an additive effect on the brain's dopamine-triggered pleasure centres. "It showed an increased pleasure from the two together than from either alone."

As well, she says, alcohol's ability to reduce inhibitions and logical thinking can often lead non-smokers to light up while drinking.

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