**Middle-class drinkers can get away with drinking MORE because their otherwise healthy lifestyles make up for it**

* **The rich are more likely to be able to drink alcohol without becoming ill**
* **Affluent middle-class tipplers tend to lead otherwise healthier lifestyles**
* **Smoking and being overweight are more associated with lower incomes**
* **Highlights the importance of wider social factors in alcohol-related harm**

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**PUBLISHED:** 01:39, 18 February 2016 | **UPDATED:** 12:31, 18 February 2016

There is no ‘safe level’ of drinking – no matter who you are – official guidelines now warn.

But according to new research, the richer you are, the more likely you are to be able to drink without getting ill.

This is because affluent middle-class tipplers tend to lead otherwise healthier lifestyles than their poorer counterparts, the researchers found.

This means these wealthier drinkers are less likely to smoke, be overweight and have a poor diet – traits more associated with the lower-income demographic.

And these same traits exacerbate a person’s susceptibility to drink-related conditions.

The findings, published in the journal BMC Public Health, suggest that the risks of alcohol are not spread evenly amongst the population, and could even be counter-balanced by maintaining an otherwise fit and healthy lifestyle.

Mark Bellis, of Bangor University, told The Times: ‘These things do not just add to each other – they have a multiplicative effect.

‘When you are overweight you do not just get the risk of being overweight … you get those added and effectively doubled as well.

‘The effects may be even greater when you add three or four types of unhealthy behaviour in.’

‘We need on an individual level for people to understand that being overweight and having an unhealthy lifestyle may carry additional risk when you’re drinking alcohol.’

The academic added: ‘People should understand that if they are overweight, smoking and drinking then the risks are not just adding to each other, they are going to multiply each other.’

‘This in no way suggests that you can avoid the risks of alcohol by changing the other things in your life. What you can do is bring down some of the overlap and multiplicative effects.

James Nicholls, of Alcohol Research UK, said: ‘This highlights the importance of wider social, economic and behavioural factors in understanding alcohol-related harm.

‘It suggests that the health risks from alcohol are much greater when combined with smoking, poor diet and lower levels of physical activity.’

Earlier this month, there were changes to the official guidelines on the recommended levels of alcohol consumption.

Men were urged to cut their intake from 21 to 14 units a week –about seven pints of beer – last month in the biggest shake-up for 30 years.

And both sexes were told to have several teetotal days a week to let the liver recover.

But Professor Theresa Marteau, who helped draw up the rules, said the advice is ‘unlikely to have a direct impact’.

Professor Marteau, who runs a Cambridge research unit, said in the journal BMJ that drinkers are likely to ignore advice in the short term as official guidelines are a ‘weak driver of change’.

But she added: ‘Alcohol consumption is strongly influenced by environmental factors such as price, availability, and marketing.

‘Strengthening one negative association with alcohol may weaken the influences of the many positive associations forged by alcohol marketing.’

n The children of women who drink during pregnancy are more likely to suffer kidney trouble in adulthood, according to research.

The study also found that exposure to alcohol before birth can heighten neurological problems if they have a stroke as an adult.