

<http://redeye.chicagotribune.com/red-013108-binge-main.0.6624482.story>

Binge damage

Excessive boozing can leave a dent on your brain—and stay there long after your prime drinking days

By [Alexia Elejalde-Ruiz](#)

RedEye

January 31 2008

You steered clear of drunken driving, abstained from risky sex, survived the most wicked of hangovers and have no scars to show from any nasty spills.

No harm, no foul after a night of heavy boozing, right?

Sorry for the buzz kill, but binge drinking may do more permanent damage than you think—especially during the prime boozing years of high school and college. Long after the keg stands have ended and the rounds of shots have lost their appeal, the damage done by youthful boozing can continue to affect your brain.

It's a word to the wise for Chicagoans, who last year were named the country's biggest binge drinkers in a government survey of the nation's 15 largest metropolitan areas, and to those who plan to booze it up on Super Bowl Sunday, one of the biggest drinking events of the year.

And most of all, it's a warning to teens and young adults. Binge drinking affects "adolescent" brains—defined as people ages 12 to 24, when the brain is undergoing important development—more severely than adult brains, said neuropsychologist Scott Swartzwelder, a psychiatry professor at Duke University who has studied the long-term consequences of binge drinking. Just as adolescent brains learn more easily, so too are they damaged more easily, he said.

The part of the brain that gets hurt most is the forebrain, which is responsible for memory, organization, motivation, decision making and impulse control, among other functions.

The damage can feel obvious during the achy haze of a hangover, when brain cells seem to take a vacation. But studies suggest that even years after binges have ended, people have trouble learning new things and storing new memories, Swartzwelder said.

The changes in brain functioning are subtle, and they may seem innocuous compared to the danger long-term alcohol abuse can pose to the liver, heart and pancreas.

"If I decreased your IQ from 120 to 110, would you even know?" asked psychiatry and pharmacology professor Fulton Crews, director of the Bowles Center for Alcohol Studies at the University of North Carolina, whose studies have found early binge drinking impairs learning and decision-making later in life.

Some people might not even care. After having a round of Irish car bombs with friends at a Little Italy bar, David Bruckman, 23, noted that plenty of successful, intelligent people have lost a few brain cells to binge drinking with little consequence.

"In corporate America, if you're a hard worker, it doesn't matter how smart you are," said Bruckman, who works as a maintenance manager for a trucking company and lives in Irving Park. "It's all about networking."

But the brain damage also can affect quality of life because it impairs a person's ability to foresee the consequences of his or her actions, leading to poor decision making, Crews said. A brain damaged by binge

drinking has a harder time learning from mistakes and has an inclination toward impulsiveness, which is linked to addiction later in life, he said.

Blacking out—when parts of a drunken night are completely washed away from your memory—is especially hard on the brain, Swartzwelder said.

"You'd have to fall down and hit yourself very hard in order for your brain memory mechanisms to shut down like they do when you black out from alcohol," he said. He noted that anyone who went to the doctor reporting memory lapses under any other circumstances would be whisked into an MRI tube to look for severe brain damage.

"In a neurological sense, it's a true insult to the brain," Swartzwelder said.

Byron Hatfield felt he insulted his brain during an alcohol-fueled stage of his life following a painful breakup with a girlfriend.

Hatfield, director of the Chicago Center for the Performing Arts' sketch comedy show "Bye Bye Liver," which pokes fun at the shared experience of drinking, said that for a time he'd kick off evenings with a shot of vodka, a shot of tequila, a shot of Jack Daniel's and a beer. The day his ex got married, he said, he holed up in a Wrigleyville bar and vowed to take a shot for every guest she had at her wedding. Sometimes Hatfield would wake up and discover he'd been at a fast food joint judging from the half-eaten chicken nugget resting on his chest.

Hatfield, now 33, started to shelve the liquor a couple of years ago when he received an unexpected card from his father that said simply: "Drinking makes the memories fade."

Indeed, Hatfield said, drinking had "sapped" him. Even months after he weaned himself off alcohol, Hatfield, a comedy writer, worried that he'd irreparably numbed the tools that made him his living: his brain and his wit.

"I thought, 'Have I seriously lost a step? Am I not as funny as I used to be?' " said Hatfield of Lincoln Park. "I feel like now I recovered from it, but for an extended period I felt slower, less creative, less immediate."

Brains impaired by heavy drinking usually recover on their own during detox, but some damage remains—and researchers don't know of any way to reverse it.

Still, there's opportunity to protect the brain going forward.

Exercise can help, as it facilitates blood flow to the brain and "if you're doing something good for your brain, there's going to be some offsetting," Swartzwelder said. Same goes for eating a good diet and sleeping enough.

Bartender Jamie Roush, 33, said he doesn't feel his mind is compromised now as a result of the binge drinking he did while he was in a fraternity in college—in part because he makes it a point to exercise it. The Lakeview resident said he keeps his mind sharp by reading regularly and doing crossword and sudoku puzzles on a daily basis.

Still, Michele Wayman, a 26-year-old cocktail waitress and Roush's co-worker at Durkin's bar in Lakeview, said the sight of so many fall-down drunk people is enough for her to steer clear of binge drinking.

"There is no way that you can abuse your body like that and think that you can be as productive later on," she said.