Drinking Alcohol to Cope With Hyperactive ADHD

Research Translation & Clinical Fact Sheet

Based on: Luderer et al. (2023). *Drinking alcohol to cope with hyperactive ADHD? Self-reports vs. continuous performance test in patients with ADHD and/or alcohol use disorder.* Frontiers in Psychiatry.

ADHD doesn't disappear in adulthood — and it doesn't exist in isolation. This study examined the overlap between ADHD and alcohol use disorder, asking a question many ADHD adults already know in their bones: **Is alcohol sometimes used to cope with hyperactivity?**

1 The ADHD-Alcohol Connection

- ADHD affects ~7% of children. For about **90% of them**, traits continue into adulthood.
- Young people with ADHD are more likely to start using substances earlier and escalate faster.
- Alcohol use disorder (AUD) occurs in **16–21% of adults with ADHD** — a meaningful intersection.
- Yet ADHD is **often missed** in people being treated for alcohol problems.

If your nervous system is wired for intensity, restlessness, and racing thoughts — and no one names it — alcohol can start to feel like a workaround. Like turning down the volume on internal noise.

2 How the Study Was Designed

47 adults in treatment were divided into three groups:

Group	Description
ADHD Only	No current substance use issues
AUD Only	Screened negative for ADHD; completed detox (≥5 days abstinent)
ADHD + AUD	Met criteria for both conditions

Participants completed two types of assessment:

SELF-REPORT QUESTIONNAIRES

"What does your internal experience feel like?"

- ADHD symptom scales
- Impulsivity measure
- Executive functioning
- Mind-wandering scale
- Quality-of-life questionnaire

QBTEST (LAB-BASED)

"How do you perform in a structured, low-distraction task?"

- Computerized attention task
- Camera tracks head movement
- Measures inattention, impulsivity, and motor activity

That difference — lived experience vs. lab performance — turned out to be the heart of the findings.

3 Key Findings

FINDING 1: THE LAB TEST

There were **no significant differences** between groups on the QbTest — not for hyperactivity, not for impulsivity, not for inattention. The objective computer test did not distinguish ADHD from AUD from ADHD+AUD.

FINDING 2: SELF-REPORT QUESTIONNAIRES

On questionnaires, ADHD groups (with or without AUD) reported more inattention, impulsivity, executive dysfunction, and mind wandering than the AUD-only group.

CRITICAL FINDING

Hyperactivity was highest in the ADHD + AUD group.

- ADHD + AUD > ADHD alone
- ADHD + AUD > AUD alone

Quality of life was **lowest** in the ADHD + AUD group.

When people were asked about their lived experience, differences emerged clearly. When they were tested in a quiet lab, differences disappeared.

4 Why the Lab Test Missed It

In a structured, novel, low-distraction setting, ADHD symptoms often **temporarily decrease**. If you have ever hyperfocused in a new environment, you have felt this. Your nervous system can marshal focus under certain conditions.

But daily life is not a controlled lab. It is noisy, layered, emotionally charged, and unpredictable.

> **Adult hyperactivity is often not obvious motor bouncing. It is:**
>
> - Inner restlessness
> - Racing thoughts
> - The feeling of needing to "turn down the volume"
> - A body that won't fully settle
>
> **That kind of hyperactivity can only really be captured by self-report. Your lived experience matters.**

5 Hyperactivity as a Pathway to Alcohol Misuse

The most clinically meaningful hypothesis from this study:

> **Adolescents with ADHD who experience intense hyperactivity may use alcohol to dampen that inner agitation. Over time, that coping strategy can evolve into alcohol use disorder.**

In this study:

- ADHD alone did not significantly differ from AUD alone in hyperactivity.
- But **ADHD + AUD showed much higher hyperactivity than either group**.

The authors suggest hyperactivity might be a specific pathway from ADHD into AUD. Not because ADHD is "broken." But because **unmanaged nervous system intensity seeks regulation** — and alcohol regulates, temporarily.

6 Mind Wandering, Executive Function & Quality of Life

People with ADHD (with or without AUD) reported more executive functioning challenges, more mind wandering, and lower quality of life — especially when ADHD and AUD co-occurred.

> **Alcohol increases mind wandering — but decreases awareness of it.**
>
> If your mind already drifts constantly, alcohol might briefly feel like clarity — even if it is not improving cognition, just muting self-awareness.

7 Integrated Takeaways

For ADHD Adults

- ADHD does not disappear in adulthood.
- Adult hyperactivity is frequently **internal** — restlessness, agitation, racing energy — not just visible movement.
- Lab tests may miss real-world symptoms.
- **Your lived experience matters.**
- If you have used alcohol to quiet your mind, slow your body, or soften restlessness — that doesn't mean you're weak.

For Clinicians

- Routine ADHD screening in addiction settings is essential.
- Self-report is more sensitive than lab-based CPTs in this population.
- Hyperactivity may be a specific pathway linking ADHD to AUD.
- ADHD + AUD is associated with lower quality of life and greater executive strain.
- Treating ADHD traits directly may improve outcomes in alcohol recovery.

Your nervous system was trying to regulate with the tools available.

The work isn't about shame. It's about finding better regulation strategies that honor your wiring.

Full Citation: Luderer, M., et al. (2023). Drinking alcohol to cope with hyperactive ADHD? Self-reports vs. continuous performance test in patients with ADHD and/or alcohol use disorder. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*.

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