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# Alcohol consumption, cigarette smoking, and subjective health in Korean elderly men

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## Abstract

The purpose of the study was to investigate the level of alcohol drinking, cigarette smoking, and subjective health in elderly Korean men and to examine the relationships among those variables. The data were collected through the questionnaire that includes general characteristics, the quantity–frequency (Q–F) method, and the Fagerstrom Tolerance Questionnaire (FTQ) scale. The prevalence of alcohol consumption was 65.2%, and 28.7% represented heavier drinkers. The prevalence of smoking was 47.0%. Among the smokers, 17.1% elderly men reported nicotine dependence in the medium range. Forty-six percent of subjects reported their health as poor or fair. In conclusion, alcohol drinking and smoking were prevalent among Korean elderly men. These findings show the need to improve strategies for educating elderly men and motivating them to incorporate healthy behaviors.

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*Keywords:* Alcohol drinking; Smoking; Health; Aged; Nicotine dependence

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## 1. Introduction

Approximately 7.3% of the Korean population was 65 years of age or more in 2000 (National Statistical Office, 2001). Because the population of the elderly has been increasing rapidly, health promotion of the elderly population has become one of the most important issues in Korea. Alcohol and nicotine are the major substances used by the

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elderly in Korea. The Koreans' attitude toward alcohol drinking and smoking among the elderly are very permissive; therefore, the elderly' health can be impaired. However, there is lack of research in health risk behaviors, such as alcohol drinking and smoking, among the elderly.

The previous studies showed that use of alcohol and tobacco was associated with a wide range of problems including physiological, mental, and social problems in the elderly (Abramson, Berger, Krumholz, & Vaccarino, 2001; Holroyd & Duryee, 1997). Alcohol consumption in the elderly can cause liver diseases, dementia, and insomnia and increases the risk of falls and other accidents (Lee, 2000). Ondus, Hujer, Mann, and Mion (2003) reported that estimates of alcohol abuse in the elderly population range from 4% to 20% in the community-dwelling elderly and up to approximately 25% among hospitalized older adults.

In the elderly, smoking has also been associated with a general decline in physical functioning as a result of the increased incidence of chronic illnesses and cancer (Guilmette, Motta, Shadel, Mukand, & Niaura, 2001; Itoh et al., 2001). Burns (2000) reported the dramatic increase in smoking-related excess mortality with advancing age. A greatly elevated risk of developing lung cancer was associated with cigarette smoking, increasing with packs of cigarettes smoked and declining with the duration of time since quitting smoking (Risch et al., 1993).

Most of the previous studies measuring smoking and drinking behaviors included young people (Camatta & Nagoshi, 1995; McCarthy et al., 1995; Miller et al., 1994).

Unhealthy behaviors were prevalent among the elderly population, and smoking and drinking were more serious among men.

The proportion of smokers among men is greater than in women in Korea. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) stated that the smoking rate among Korean men was ranked first in the world in 1998, whereas women's smoking rate is ranked 69th. In addition, alcohol abuse occurs more frequently among men. In general, men are heavier and more problematic drinkers than are the women in Korea. It has been reported that Korean people drink alcohol and smoke more cigarettes than do the people who live in other countries (OECD Health data, 2000).

The mortality rate of middle-aged Korean men who are in their 40s is approximately three times higher than that of middle-aged Korean women who are in their 40s (National Statistical Office, 2002). Alcohol drinking and cigarette smoking is one of the most influential factors on mortality rate, and it could be extended to the older adulthood. However, few studies have focused on the alcohol drinking and cigarette smoking in Korean elderly men.

Self-reported subjective health appears to be very important in predicting subsequent mortality in the elderly. Self-rated health seems to be a better predictor of mortality in elderly men than in women (Helmer, Barberger-Gateau, Letenneur, & Dartigues, 1999).

In this study, it was assumed that subjective health is associated with alcohol drinking and cigarette smoking in Korean elderly men.

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