



College Drinking

Abusive and underage college drinking are significant public health problems, and they exact an enormous toll on the intellectual and social lives of students on campuses across the United States.

Drinking at college has become a ritual that students often see as an integral part of their higher-education experience. Many students come to college with established drinking habits, and the college environment can exacerbate the problem. Research shows that more than 80 percent of college students drink alcohol, and almost half report binge drinking in the past 2 weeks.

Virtually all college students experience the effects of college drinking—whether they drink or not.



Consequences of Abusive College Drinking

Drinking affects college students, their families, and college communities at large. Consequences include:

Death

Each year an estimated 1,825 college students between the ages of 18 and 24 die from alcohol-related unintentional injuries, including motor vehicle crashes.¹

Injury

Each year an estimated 599,000 students between the ages of 18 and 24 are unintentionally injured under the influence of alcohol.¹

Assault

Each year an estimated 696,000 students between the ages of 18 and 24 are assaulted by another student who has been drinking.¹

Sexual Abuse

Each year an estimated 97,000 students between the ages of 18 and 24 are victims of alcohol-related sexual assault or date rape.¹

What is “binge drinking?”

Many college alcohol problems are related to **binge drinking**. Binge drinking is a pattern of drinking that brings blood alcohol concentration (BAC) levels to 0.08 g/dL. This usually occurs after 4 drinks for women and 5 drinks for men in about 2 hours.

Drinking this way can pose serious health and safety risks, including car crashes, drunk driving arrests, sexual assaults, and injuries. Over the long term, frequent binge drinking can damage the liver and other organs.



Unsafe Sex

Each year an estimated 400,000 students between the ages of 18 and 24 have unprotected sex, and more than 100,000 students between the ages of 18 and 24 report having been too intoxicated to know if they consented to having sex.²



Academic Problems

About one-quarter of college students report having academic consequences because of their drinking, including missing class, falling behind, doing poorly on exams or papers, and receiving lower grades overall.³⁻⁶

Alcohol Abuse and Dependence

Nineteen percent of college students between the ages of 18 and 24 met the criteria for alcohol abuse or dependence, but only 5 percent of these students sought treatment for alcohol problems in the year preceding the survey.⁷

Drunk Driving

Each year an estimated 3,360,000 students between the ages of 18 and 24 drive under the influence of alcohol.¹

Other Consequences

These include suicide attempts, health problems, vandalism, property damage, and involvement with the police.

Factors Affecting Student Drinking

Although the majority of students come to college already having some experience with alcohol, certain aspects of college life, such as unstructured time, the widespread availability of alcohol, inconsistent enforcement of underage drinking laws, and limited interactions with parents and other adults, can intensify the problem. In fact, college students have higher binge-drinking rates and a higher incidence of drunk driving than their non-college peers.

The first 6 weeks of freshman year is an especially vulnerable time for heavy drinking and alcohol-related consequences because of student expectations and social pressures at the start of the academic year.

How much is a drink?

To avoid binge drinking and its consequences, college students (and all drinkers) are advised to track the number of drinks they consume over a given period of time. That is why it is important to know exactly what counts as a drink.

In the United States, a **standard drink** is one that contains about 14 grams of pure alcohol, which is found in:

- » 12 ounces of beer, which is usually about 5 percent alcohol
- » 5 ounces of wine, which is typically about 12 percent alcohol
- » 1.5 ounces of distilled spirits, which is about 40 percent alcohol

Unfortunately, although the standard drink amounts are helpful for following health guidelines, they often do not reflect customary serving sizes, particularly in a college environment. A large cup of beer, an overpoured glass of wine, or a single mixed drink could contain much more alcohol than a standard drink.



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Factors related to specific college environments also are significant. Students attending schools with strong Greek systems and with prominent athletic programs tend to drink more than students at other types of schools. In terms of living arrangements, alcohol consumption is highest among students living in fraternities and sororities and lowest among commuting students who live with their families.

An often overlooked preventive factor involves the continuing influence of parents. Research shows that students who choose not to drink often do so because their parents discussed alcohol use and its adverse consequences with them.

Addressing College Drinking

Ongoing research continues to improve our understanding of how to address this persistent and costly problem. Successful efforts typically involve a mix of prevention, intervention, and treatment strategies that target individual students, the student body as a whole, and the broader college community.



Strategies Targeting Individual Students

Strategies that target individual students, including those at risk for alcohol problems, are effective, particularly alcohol screening and brief intervention programs conducted in campus health centers. These programs evaluate students' alcohol use and provide feedback about:

- » The risks of drinking
- » How these risks interfere with meeting their goals
- » How to monitor and reduce drinking
- » How to handle high-risk situations

A focus on individual intervention and treatment is significant, as research shows that 19 percent of college students between the ages of 18 and 24 meet the criteria for alcohol abuse and dependence, but only 5 percent of them seek treatment assistance.

Strategies Targeting the Campus and Surrounding Community

In combination with individually oriented interventions, strategies that focus on the college environment are another key component of a comprehensive program. These prevention efforts target the entire student body as well as the broader college community and include strategies that:

- » Provide alcohol education
- » Limit alcohol availability and enforce underage-drinking laws

Alcohol poisoning and college students

Thousands of college students are transported to the emergency room each year for **alcohol poisoning**, which occurs when high levels of alcohol suppress the nervous and respiratory systems and the body struggles to rid itself of toxins produced from the breakdown of alcohol. Signs of this dangerous condition can include:

- » Mental confusion, stupor, coma, or the person cannot be roused
- » Vomiting
- » Slow or irregular breathing
- » Hypothermia or low body temperature, bluish or pale skin

Alcohol poisoning can lead to permanent brain damage or death, so a person showing any of these signs requires immediate medical attention. Don't wait. Call 911 if you suspect alcohol poisoning.



- » Provide alcohol-free campus activities
- » Notify parents of alcohol-related infractions
- » Adjust academic schedules to include more Friday classes and reduce the number of long weekends during the semester

Social-norms approaches, which focus on correcting student misperceptions about how much their peers drink, have been widely implemented. However, new research shows that these approaches may work best in individual and online applications, in which students receive personalized feedback, but they are much less effective as part of campus-wide campaigns.

Accumulating research shows that campus–community partnerships can be effective. With the involvement of campus administrators, local law enforcement, merchants, residents, and local leaders, these partnerships address college drinking through the application and consistent enforcement of community policies. Effective campus–community partnership strategies can include:

- » Publicizing and enforcing underage-drinking and zero-tolerance laws for drivers under age 21
- » Establishing partnerships between the college and the local residential and business communities to reduce access to alcohol and to address violations
- » Increasing the price of alcohol, such as the elimination of low-cost drink specials in bars near college campuses, because research shows that when alcohol is more expensive people drink less and have fewer alcohol-related problems.



Strong leadership from a concerned college president in combination with an involved campus community and a comprehensive program of evidence-based strategies can help address harmful student drinking.

For more information, please visit: www.niaaa.nih.gov

¹ Hingson, R.W.; Zha, W.; and Weitzman, E.R. Magnitude of and trends in alcohol-related mortality and morbidity among U.S. college students ages 18–24, 1998–2005. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs Supplement* 16:12–20, 2009.

² Hingson, R.W.; Heeren, T.; Zakocs, R.C.; et al. Magnitude of alcohol-related mortality and morbidity among U.S. college students ages 18–24. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 63(2):136–144, 2002.

³ Engs, R.C.; Diebold, B.A.; and Hansen, D.J. The drinking patterns and problems of a national sample of college students, 1994. *Journal of Alcohol and Drug Education* 41(3):13–33, 1996.

⁴ Presley, C.A.; Meilman, P.W.; and Cashin, J.R. *Alcohol and Drugs on American College Campuses: Use, Consequences, and Perceptions of the Campus Environment, Vol. IV: 1992–1994*. Carbondale, IL: Core Institute, Southern Illinois University, 1996.

⁵ Presley, C.A.; Meilman, P.W.; Cashin, J.R.; and Lyster, R. *Alcohol and Drugs on American College Campuses: Use, Consequences, and Perceptions of the Campus Environment, Vol. III: 1991–1993*. Carbondale, IL: Core Institute, Southern Illinois University, 1996.

⁶ Wechsler, H.; Lee, J.E.; Kuo, M.; et al. Trends in college binge drinking during a period of increased prevention efforts: Findings from four Harvard School of Public Health study surveys, 1993–2001. *Journal of American College Health* 50(5):203–217, 2002.

⁷ National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions, 2002 (special data run).



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