

Alcohol and Increased Behavioral Risk for AIDS

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There is evidence that alcohol increases the likelihood of sexual behavior that puts a person at risk for AIDS. However, the relationship between alcohol and sexual behavior is complex and not well understood.

Public health education is generally regarded as the single most important step for stemming the spread of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection, which leads to acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS: Turner et al. 1989). To be most effective, however, education programs must target the specific behaviors that place people at risk for HIV infection (for more information about HIV transmission, see the article by Kruger and Jerrells, pp. 57-63). Toward this end, epidemiologic studies have identified certain sexual behaviors, called high-risk or risky sexual behaviors that increase the risk of HIV transmission (see sidebar). These studies have also determined the prevalence of these high-risk sexual behaviors among some groups (e.g., Chmiel et al. 1987). What remains more elusive, however, is an understanding of why people engage in these behaviors. A lack of understanding of what causes sexual risk-taking behavior and the extent to which these causes differ across risk groups is likely to compromise the effectiveness of intervention efforts aimed at changing these behaviors and stemming the spread of AIDS.

Recently, researchers have identified alcohol as one potential cause of sexual risk-taking (Flora and Thorensen 1988). The link between alcohol and sexual behavior appears to be a matter of consensus. They are paired throughout history, literature, and popular culture. Alcohol has been associated with sexual aggression: liberal sexual attitudes and practices: and, among adolescents, with the early onset of sexual activity and degree of sexual involvement (for reviews, see Crowe and George 1989; Lang 1985; Wilsnack 1984; Wilson 1981). Only recently, however, has systematic attention turned to the relationship between alcohol use and sexual risk-taking, per se. This small but growing body of literature provides support for an association between drinking and risky sex, but leaves key questions regarding the underlying causal relationship between alcohol use and risky sexual behavior largely unanswered. In particular, it remains unclear whether drinking in sexual situations causes sexual risk-taking behavior, or whether both alcohol use and risky sex are linked by some third, underlying cause such as an enduring personality trait or lifestyle variable (e.g., risk-taking propensity or unconventionality).

As one step toward addressing this gap in our understanding, this article reviews research that examines the relationship between alcohol use and sexual behavior. The first part of the article reviews the most current research on the issue of sexual risk-taking behavior and alcohol. First, laboratory studies are reviewed and interpreted in terms of two major theoretical models proposed to account for alcohol's effects on social behavior. Second, survey research is reviewed. This research examines the content of individually held beliefs about alcohol's effects on sexual behavior (called expectancies), and the relationship between naturally occurring drinking behavior and sexual behaviors, especially risky ones. The second part of this article offers an interpretation of the relationship between drinking and risky sexual behavior, and develops the commonsense notion that a behavior must be inhibited before it can be disinhibited. Implications of this perspective for future research and for intervention efforts to prevent sexual risk-taking behavior are discussed.

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