

Alcohol Use and Risky Sexual Behavior among College Students: Evaluating the Evidence

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Abstract

Objective: To review and summarize existing literature on the link between alcohol use and risky sexual behaviors among youth, especially collegiate youth, and to offer recommendations for both research and intervention.

Method: Empirical studies testing the link between alcohol use and risky sexual behaviors were reviewed in an effort to answer two broad questions: (1) Is an individual who engages in one behavior more likely to engage in the other (a global association)? (2) Is an individual who engages in one behavior on a specific occasion more likely to engage in the other on that same occasion (an event-specific association)? Primary attention was devoted to studies using event-level methodology (i.e., studies that assess drinking and risky sex on a specific occasion); those published in the past 10 years; and, where appropriate, those using randomly selected samples.

Conclusions: Results of reviewed studies were generally consistent across global and event levels of analysis, but differed across types of risky behaviors. Alcohol use was strongly linked to indiscriminate forms of risky sex (i.e., having multiple or casual sex partners, failures to discuss risk issues before sex), and to the decision to have sex in the first place, whereas it was inconsistently related to protective behaviors (i.e., condom and birth control use). Moreover, the links among alcohol use, indiscriminate behaviors, and intercourse probability were robust across between- and within-person analyses, suggesting that alcohol's link to these behaviors cannot be attributed solely to stable individual differences between people who do and don't drink. Finally, sexual events yielding significant inverse associations between drinking and protective behaviors, relative to those finding no such effect, disproportionately involved younger individuals and first intercourse experiences, and occurred on average longer ago. Recommendations for research include greater use of event-based methodologies, diary studies, and within-person analyses, elaborated measurement of both alcohol and risky sex variables, and the development of more refined models that place alcohol use within a network of multiple, inter-related risk behaviors. Future efforts aimed at reducing alcohol use in potentially sexual situations may decrease some forms of risky sex, but appear unlikely to directly affect protective behaviors.

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