

Adolescent Alcohol and Tobacco Use: Onset, Persistence, and Trajectories of Use Across Two Samples

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Abstract

Aims: We examined the alcohol-tobacco relation using two prospective ethnically diverse samples. Trajectories of alcohol and tobacco use are portrayed, and we describe trajectories by sex and ethnicity. Using prospective analyses, we examine plausible direction of causality, and we characterize initiation versus persistence of drinking and smoking as a function of use of the other substance.

Design/Setting: Data were from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (AddHealth) and the Adolescent Health Risk Study (AHRS). Follow-up intervals for AddHealth and AHRS were one and five years, respectively.

Participants: AddHealth respondents (N=4,831) were on average 14.8 years (48% male; 23% Black, 61% White) and AHRS respondents (N=1,814) were on average 16.7 years (47% male; 44% Black, 49% White).

Measurements: Two alcohol consumption variables and two smoking variables were used: drinking frequency and heavy drinking frequency, and regular (current) smoking and daily number of cigarettes.

Findings: Alcohol and tobacco use exhibited monotonic increases over adolescence and young adulthood. Men and White respondents reported more use than women and Black respondents. Alcohol and tobacco were moderately associated at both times. Analyses revealed that prior alcohol use predicted tobacco use more strongly than the converse. Initiation of smoking was a function of prior drinking; to a lesser extent, initiation of drinking was a function of prior smoking. Persistence of smoking was a function of prior drinking and persistence of drinking was a function of prior smoking.

Conclusions: Provisional support exists for the claim that alcohol use more strongly predicts tobacco use than the converse. For both drinking and smoking, onset and persistence are predicted by prior use of the other substance, and these associations were robust across sex and ethnicity.

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