

MU study finds binge drinking among college students impaires decision-making ability

May 25 2007



Image: budweiser beer

People addicted to alcohol and young adults who are heavy drinkers, but not considered alcoholics, have something in common: they possess poor decision-making skills, according to psychologists at the University of Missouri-Columbia. The findings are based on research examining binge drinking and heavy alcohol use among college students.

The study was led by Anna E. Goudriaan, a former postdoctoral student in the College of Arts and Science's Department of Psychological Sciences, who is now a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Amsterdam (Netherlands). She collaborated with Emily R. Grekin and Kenneth J. Sher of MU's Midwest Alcoholism Research Center. Grekin,

a former MU research assistant, is now an assistant professor at Wayne State University. She is a Curators' professor of clinical psychology at MU.

The team of researchers examined 200 participants during a four-year period by incorporating the Iowa Gambling Test (IGT) into the analysis. The IGT is a test of decision making strategy and measures people's tendency to make immediate (disadvantageous) or long-term (advantageous) choices. The MU students were between the ages of 18 and 22. The initial alcohol use analysis was conducted when the students were freshmen and continued until their junior years in college. Researchers obtained information about the age they began drinking and their frequency of having drinking.

Based on drinking habits, the participants were grouped into four categories: low binge drinkers, stable/moderate binge drinkers, increasing binge drinkers and stable/high binge drinkers. Participants completed online surveys each semester detailing their drinking habits. Three years into the study, the researchers administered the IGT, a computer card game, to gauge risky decision making and impulsivity among the participants. By selecting cards, the goal of the game is to win as much money possible. Certain types of card selections are advantageous and result in monetary gain, while others are disadvantageous and result in monetary loss.

Findings indicated those in the stable/high alcohol use category, who had longer histories of binge drinking, made riskier and less advantageous choices, which reflect problems associated with planning for the future, Goudriaan said.

In addition, only students who started binge drinking when they were younger showed impairment on the task.

"There is reason to think that heavy binge drinking during adolescence, when the brain is still rapidly developing, may have some negative legacy on psychological development," Sher said. "The interesting thing is that if we were to just look at binge drinkers and how impaired they are in the decision making process as juniors, we'd really be obscuring the important issue, which is how long they've been binge drinkers and/or how early they started."

Source: University of Missouri-Columbia

Citation: MU study finds binge drinking among college students impaires decision-making ability (2007, May 25) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2007-05-mu-binge-college-students-impaires.html>

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