

Heavy drinking undergraduates who are impulsive, aggressive may be at high risk for alcohol problems

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In a national survey of undergraduates, roughly six percent met criteria for current alcohol dependence (AD), and approximately 31 percent met criteria for current alcohol abuse. While many undergraduates "mature out" of heavy alcohol use after graduation, a minority will continue to abuse alcohol and be at risk for alcohol-related problems. This study investigated which undergraduates are most likely to engage in high-risk drinking, using alcohol-use disorder (AUD) criteria and binge-drinking endorsement as identifiers.

Results will be published in the January 2012 issue of *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research* and are currently available at Early View.

"Many, if not most, undergraduate college students reduce their level of drinking after they graduate from college and are no longer in the environment that led to their drinking," said Cheryl L. Beseler, a researcher at Colorado State University and corresponding author for the study. "Some of the reduction is motivated by having to take on adult responsibilities, such as employment and starting a family. However, some young adults continue to drink at levels that increase their risk of an AUD. We do not yet understand why this occurs, but probably the reasons include genetic and personality factors and interactions between them. Therefore, we included in our study assessments of potentially relevant aspects of personality as well as family history, which is a proxy

for genetics."

"The general issue of predicting chronicity of [alcohol](#) problems or excessive alcohol use at any age is important since the course of heavy drinking and AUDs is variable across individuals," noted Kenneth J. Sher, Curators' Professor of psychological sciences at The University of Missouri and the Midwest Alcoholism Research Center. "Certainly being able to establish a prognosis for college-student problem drinkers would be helpful information both to the drinker and to those providing services to them. While it would be helpful to have more longitudinal data, it certainly seems likely that the more severe groups would have poorer prognosis, regardless if students or nonstudents."

Researchers analyzed data from an anonymous online survey of 361 [undergraduates](#) (265 females, 96 males) – including items from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Disorders - Fourth Edition that clinicians use to diagnose an [alcohol dependence](#) and/or abuse problem – to help identify drinking patterns and personality traits.

"Our most interesting finding is that we found two groups of college students who drank at fairly high levels," said Beseler, "but one group was more inclined to drink to feel better, more impulsive, and more aggressive than the other group, which also drank a lot of alcohol." These two groups were the latter of three groups identified: the largest class (n=217) primarily endorsed tolerance, none were considered AD; the middle class (n=114) endorsed primarily tolerance and drinking more than intended, 34.2 percent met criteria for AD; the third class (n=30) endorsed all criteria with high probabilities, all met criteria for AD.

"Using state-of-the art statistical techniques, this manuscript shows that there is a continuum of problematic alcohol involvement and this can be represented via either a dimensional or a categorical approach to

representing this severity," said Sher. "Individuals with more severe problems tend to be higher on risk factors that have been previously shown to be associated with alcohol problems."

In response to a query about the possibility of skewed results due to the large number of female respondents in the sample, Sher noted that "the issue isn't the proportion of women in the sample but, rather, how representative the sample is of the population from which it was drawn. As currently described, it is difficult to determine if sampling bias materially affected the results reported." Beseler pointed out that they found very little difference in the amount of alcohol that the women drank compared to the men, and contended that a higher number of young men in the sample would have simply led to more extreme differences in the impulsivity and aggression group as young men tend to score higher on these scales than young women.

"If a college student knows they drink to make things more fun, is impulsive, and has a history of aggressive behavior, they may want to monitor their drinking," said Beseler. "If a parent knows his or her child possesses these traits, they should be aware of the risks these personality traits might pose if their child is drinking too much. Additionally, those who treat [alcohol problems](#) in young adults may want to screen for these behaviors in their patients."

Provided by Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research

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