

## Recent veterans in college engage in riskier health behaviors

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College students who have served in the U.S. conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan are more likely than their non-veteran peers to use tobacco, drink in excess and engage in other behaviors that endanger their health and safety, according to a study that appeared in the latest issue of *American Journal of Health Promotion*.

“We also found some protective behaviors where [veterans](#) showed particular strengths,” said lead author Rachel Widome, Ph.D., of the

Center for Chronic Disease Outcomes Research at the Minneapolis Veterans Affairs Medical Center and University of Minnesota.

In the study, 8,651 Minnesota [college students](#)—7813 nonveterans, 405 veterans who had served in the conflicts in Iraq and [Afghanistan](#) (Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom or OEF/OIF) and 410 veterans who had not served in OEF/OIF—completed a survey of health-related behaviors.

More OEF/OIF veterans said they were currently cigarette smokers or had recently used smokeless [tobacco](#), compared with non-veteran students. Higher percentages of these veterans also reported binge drinking—more than five drinks at one time—during the previous two weeks, and riding in a car driven by an intoxicated person during the prior year. Other hazardous behaviors, including fighting and carrying a weapon, were also more common among veterans, though the study notes that weapon possession may be in relation to their military service.

On the positive side, OEF/OIF veterans reported being more physically active than other students: a significantly higher percentage engaged in strengthening exercise regularly, and fewer spent over two hours a day watching TV or playing video or computer games. They were also less likely to use marijuana. Among current cigarette smokers, more OEF/OIF veterans planned to quit before graduation than non-veterans.

The study helps to fill knowledge gaps about these students' well-being, said Brad Badgley, M.Ed., chair of the section of the American College [Health](#) Association that addresses veterans' needs. "There has been some limited research regarding the transitional process for student-veterans returning to higher education, but a real focus on overall health and wellness has been missing," he said.

Existing programs for recently-returning veterans have paid effective

attention to pressing problems like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury, “but it is time to widen the lens and look at health from a broader perspective,” he said. The authors note that PTSD and other mental health issues may also contribute to the health risk behaviors they examined.

Widome pointed out that what happens in young adulthood can have major long-term health consequences. “You can log a lot of healthy years if you quit smoking earlier than later,” she said, “And it’s an important time for establishing health behaviors for the rest of the life course.”

Her findings have implications beyond college campuses, she added. “I suspect veterans attending college are better supported in many ways than those who go directly to work, or are looking for work... Health promotion programs and interventions for this whole population is an area we need to explore.”

**More information:** Widome, R. et al. Health risk behaviors of Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans attending college *Am J Health Promotion*, 2011, 26: 109-116.

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