

Binge drinking by freshman women tied to sexual assault risk, according to new research

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Many young women who steer clear of alcohol while they're in high school may change their ways once they go off to college. And those who take up binge drinking may be at relatively high risk of sexual assault, according to a University at Buffalo-led study in the January issue of the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*.

The college years are famously associated with drinking. But little has been known about how young women change their high school drinking habits once they start college.

So for the new study, the research team followed 437 young women from high school graduation through freshman year of college. They found that of women who had never drunk heavily in high school (if at all), nearly half admitted to heavy episodic drinking -- commonly called [binge drinking](#) -- at least once by the end of their first college semester. Young women who were already engaging in binge drinking in high school continued drinking at similar levels in college.

What's more, binge drinking was linked to students' risk of [sexual victimization](#) -- regardless of what their drinking habits had been in high school.

Of all young women whose biggest binge had included four to six drinks, one quarter said they'd been sexually victimized in the fall semester. That included anything from unwanted [sexual contact](#) to rape.

And the more alcohol those binges involved, the greater the likelihood of [sexual assault](#). Of women who'd ever consumed 10 or more drinks in a sitting since starting college, 59 percent were sexually victimized by the end of their first semester. Though young women are not to blame for being victimized -- that fault lies squarely with the [perpetrator](#) -- if colleges can make more headway in reducing heavy drinking, they may be able to prevent more sexual assaults in the process.

"This suggests that drinking-prevention efforts should begin before college," said lead researcher Maria Testa, a senior scientist at UB's Research Institute on [Addictions](#).

The study also underscores the fact that even kids who don't drink in high school are at risk of heavy drinking once they head off to college, Testa said.

For parents, the bottom line is to talk with your kids about drinking before they go to college -- whatever you think their drinking habits have been in high school, according to Testa. And after they've left for college, keep talking.

Provided by University at Buffalo

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