

First sips of alcohol start in second grade

June 19 2013, by Glenda Fauntleroy



The age at which many children in the U.S. take their first sip of alcohol is surprisingly young, finds a new study in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

Researchers from the University of Pittsburgh collected data from 452 children in one Pennsylvania county each year from ages 8 and a half through 18. The children were asked how old they were when they first sipped or tasted alcohol, had a drink, had three or more drinks in a row, or were drunk.

By age 8, 37 percent had sipped alcohol. That number jumped to 66 percent by age 12. By age 18.5, nearly all (96 percent) had sipped or tasted alcohol. Also, 16 percent of 16-year-olds reported binge drinking

(three or more drinks).

"The most alarming result was the fact that over half of the children had tried sipping or tasting alcohol by age 11," said lead author John E. Donovan, Ph.D., associate professor of psychiatry & epidemiology. "Our earlier research found that childhood sipping predicts early initiation of drinking."

This is concerning because other research has found that early-onset drinking is associated with behaviors such as binge drinking, marijuana use, delinquency, precocious sexual behavior, drinking and driving in adolescence, and substance use disorder, Donovan added.

The study also highlighted racial differences among the children's early drinking habits. For instance, only 18 percent of 8.5-year-old Black children sipped alcohol compared with 44 percent of White children. And at age 11, 36 percent of Black children were light drinkers compared with 57 percent of White children.

"Some researchers attribute this to several factors, including stronger parental disapproval of teen drinking in African-American families, the lower response of African-American teens to peer pressure, and the greater influence of religiosity in African-American families," Donovan explained.

Randi Alter, Ph.D., an expert at the Indiana Prevention Resource Center at Indiana University School of Public Health, Bloomington, said she was surprised to see the rates of early alcohol use by second graders.

"We know that the longer we can delay this experimentation, the less likely we are to see problems," she said. "This study just confirms that we need to be talking with our [children](#) and students at a much earlier age than most would think."

Alter added that most underage drinkers get their [alcohol](#) from family members or those of legal drinking age, which underscores the need to get adults to understand the risks of adolescent [drinking](#).

"If we can't impress upon adults how providing to underage drinkers is dangerous, then perhaps we can remind them that it is illegal."

More information: Donovan, J. and Molina, B. Types of alcohol use experience from childhood through adolescence, *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 2013.

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