

Light to moderate alcohol leads to good cheer at Danish high-school parties

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Many people, especially young adults, engage in high-risk drinking because of the belief it will lead to positive mood effects such as cheerfulness. A new study of the association between blood alcohol content (BAC) and the subjective effects of alcohol like cheerfulness, focus distraction, and sluggishness among students in a real-life setting of high-school parties, has found that cheerfulness increased up to a certain BAC value for girls, and then decreased at higher BACs, while it increased linearly for boys.

Results will be published in the March 2014 issue of *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research* and are currently available at Early View.

"A large body of research has shown that the majority of adolescents and [young adults](#) report [having] social and enhancement motives for drinking [alcohol](#)," said Marie Eliassen, a research assistant at the University of Southern Denmark as well as corresponding author for the study. "These motives can include: 'it makes social gatherings more fun,' 'to get in a party mood,' and 'because it's fun.' Comparing nationalities, social and enhancement motives were especially prevalent in North America and northern and mid-Europe, while for example in Spain, the most frequent motives of drinking among young adults were that they liked the taste and that it was a custom/social habit."

Eliassen explained that in Denmark, there exist no national or regional restrictions or policies on selling and [drinking alcohol](#) at high-school parties; students are allowed to drink and buy alcohol regardless their age

as these functions are regarded as private and thus the age limit for purchasing alcohol is not enforced. "At least since the 1960s and probably also before that, students have bought and drank alcohol at these parties," she said. "In the last couple of years, a few Danish high schools have introduced alcohol-free parties, but we do not have any exact statistics. It is still the norm to serve alcohol at the parties at the majority of Danish high schools."

Eliassen and her colleagues examined 230 Danish high-school students (151 girls, 79 boys) aged 15 to 20 years who were attending high school parties. During the parties, the students visited an examination room located near the party in one-hour intervals to have their BAC and levels of cheerfulness, focus distraction, and sluggishness measured. BACs were measured by means of a breath analyzer, while cheerfulness (on a score from 0-16), focus distraction (score from 0-8), and sluggishness (score from 0-4) were self-reported.

"We found that low to moderate [alcohol consumption](#) is associated with increased cheerfulness among adolescents attending high-school parties," said Eliassen. "Extensive alcohol consumption leading to high BACs was associated with decreased cheerfulness among girls while this was not found for boys. However, few boys had very high BACs, which makes it difficult to draw conclusions. In addition, alcohol consumption increased focus distraction among these students. Another interesting finding was that the majority of the participating students had low to moderate BACs, indicating that they did not drink as much alcohol as is normally presumed."

Eliassen noted that the lack of a decrease in cheerfulness at higher BACs among boys may be explained by a higher tolerance to alcohol among boys, compared to the girls, as the boys drank alcohol and binge drank more frequently, and generally had higher weekly alcohol consumption than the girls. Eliassen underlined that, most likely, cheerfulness will also

decrease at high BACs for boys, but as only a few boys had high BACs at the parties, the turning point could not be identified in the study.

"These findings show alcohol's subjective effects in a real-life setting," said Eliassen. "The participants were followed over time, acting as they normally did at a party, including deciding themselves how much to drink. It is important to incorporate the context in which alcohol is consumed in order to obtain full knowledge about alcohol's subjective effects, as the context has been shown to have a high impact on the subjective effects of alcohol."

Eliassen said findings have several implications: "First, public-health campaigns as well as parental and clinician comments that neglect aspects of cheerfulness associated with alcohol may contradict adolescents' positive experiences. Such statements and campaigns might seem untrustworthy, as adolescents actually perceive increased cheerfulness when drinking alcohol up to certain amounts. Perhaps alcohol prevention strategies targeting adolescents ... could instead focus on having fun without an excessive alcohol intake. Second, our findings of increased focus distraction at high BACs stress the importance of reducing excessive alcohol drinking, as increased focus distraction is strongly associated with higher risks of accidents. This finding may also work as an argument for parents and clinicians trying to reduce excessive alcohol consumption among adolescents. Third, the findings of a low to moderate BAC among the majority of the students may be used to challenge the idea that the majority of adolescents drink in excess and thus change adolescents' own perception of normality, which again may reduce their alcohol consumption."

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