

Metastudy on correlations of sports participation and substance abuse

December 10 2013

Following a review of published studies, McMaster researchers have found that participation in sport raises the chance of adolescents and young adults abusing alcohol.

However, researchers also found that while sports are associated with increased [alcohol](#) use, they result in a decrease in illicit drug use among teens. Marijuana use was less clear—some studies showed increased use, others did not.

"Sport participation in the past was associated with increased alcohol use in the future, sometimes years into the future," said John Cairney, a professor in the Department of Family Medicine. "The patterns that are established early can last well into a person's life."

The research was recently published in the online edition of *Addictive Behaviours*.

At the request of the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, Cairney's team searched various databases for studies published between 1982 and 2012 that had followed people over time. All but one of the studies took place in the United States.

"The lack of Canadian data is glaring and a really important gap in the science," said Cairney. "We found quite a lot of evidence that participation in sport is associated with increased use of [alcohol consumption](#) for adolescents and [young adults](#) from 12-year-old youths

to those in their early 20s. Just as intriguing, is that sport is associated with lower [illicit drug](#) use. So, there is a mixed message to the potential benefits of sport."

Cairney added that the many links between alcohol and sport in society may be part of the issue.

Beer commercials during televised sporting events and the acceptance of drinking as part of the experience is disconcerting – particularly if parents and coaches turn a blind eye to this behavior, he explained. "This is potentially a problem and something we need to address."

Organizations such as the Start2Finish program already use sport to reinforce positive youth wellness. This running-based program targets disadvantaged inner-city youth, but also incorporates a reading program with health and nutrition advice.

Cairney believes it's also possible to design sports-based interventions for children and youth.

"Let's be intentional about how we use sport in a positive way, and figure out a program that is sports-based that really does address the problems with alcohol and drug use as well," he said.

"We need to understand what aspects of sport participation are most beneficial, and design rigorous trials to see if sport interventions really can reduce or prevent drug use in youth."

Provided by McMaster University

Citation: Metastudy on correlations of sports participation and substance abuse (2013, December 10) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-12-metastudy-sports->

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