

Early marriage may lead to unsafe drinking behavior by those with higher genetic risk

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The finding follows previous research that found marriage protects against risky alcohol use and moderates genetic influences on alcohol outcomes, but previous studies generally focused on older adult samples.

"In a sample of young adults, we found that marriage was not uniformly

protective against [alcohol](#) misuse. In fact, we found that early marriage (i.e., by age 21) seemed to exacerbate risk for alcohol use among individuals with a higher genetic [predisposition](#)," said study author Rebecca Smith, a doctoral student in the Department of Psychology in the College of Humanities and Sciences. "Thus, early marriage does not have the same protective benefit in terms of attenuating genetic predispositions that has been observed for marriage later in adulthood."

The study, "Using a Developmental Perspective to Examine the Moderating Effects of Marriage on Heavy Episodic Drinking in a Young Adult Sample Enriched for Risk," will be published in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Development and Psychopathology*.

The study was conducted by researchers at VCU and six other universities. It involved a sample of 937 individuals in a dataset of people who reported heavy episodic drinking and marital status between ages 21 and 25.

"These findings are important because they demonstrate how risk and protective factors may intersect in different ways at different points across the lifespan," Smith said. "Although marriage is typically considered to be protective, when considering the role of development a different picture emerges, such that early marriage may increase the risk of heavy episodic drinking among people who have high genetic predispositions for alcohol use. It contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the role of marriage."

Smith said the researchers were somewhat surprised by their findings, given that marriage is generally considered to be protective against poor mental and physical health outcomes.

"However, when we stepped back to think about what we know about development and developmental psychology, our findings made more

sense," she said. "Traditional life events, such as [marriage](#) and parenthood, tend to occur during certain periods in life. So when those types of events occur either earlier or later in life than is typical (in American culture), they may not be as protective as we would expect."

Individuals who marry young tend to experience more consequences that are negative and face more challenges, such as [mental health](#) and substance use problems, than those who marry at a later age, Smith said. The study's findings fit within that larger context.

"Individuals who marry young may not be the best influences on one another," she said. "This may create an environment in which other risk factors that contribute to alcohol use, such as genetic predispositions, are exacerbated."

Provided by Virginia Commonwealth University

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