

Young adults report lower alcohol use after learning that drinking is declining among their peers

December 11 2023



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Learning that their peers' alcohol use is declining over time may help reduce young adults' drinking, according to the first study that tested this

approach among community-based participants (versus college students). During young adulthood, drinking habits tend to become established. Young adults are known to be influenced by social norms, particularly their peers' drinking behaviors.

They tend to misperceive those behaviors, however, conforming to a false "norm" that often exceeds their peers' actual [alcohol](#) consumption. Interventions that highlight discrepancies between perceived and actual drinking norms—called personalized normative feedback—can lead to reduced use. In studies, the reduction is consistent but small. This may be because most interventions are based on static norms, highlighting current alcohol use data.

Dynamic norms, in contrast, emphasize collective changes over time, potentially signaling that reduced drinking represents a trend. For the study in *Alcohol: Clinical & Experimental Research*, investigators tested the effects of a dynamic norms intervention on young adults' perceptions of peers' drinking and their own alcohol use. They compared those participants with a group who experienced a similar intervention addressing COVID-19 vaccination.

Researchers worked with 546 adults aged 18–24, unvaccinated against COVID-19, recruited from the community in states across the US. The participants filled out a [baseline survey](#) on their alcohol use and perceptions of their peers' drinking behaviors. They were randomly divided into two groups and experienced a dynamic norms intervention on drinking or COVID-19 vaccination.

For the alcohol feedback intervention, researchers calculated dynamic norms using CDC data on alcohol use, drinking frequency, amounts consumed, heavy episodic (binge) drinking, and driving under the influence of alcohol. In a survey, participants in the alcohol group guessed the amount and frequency of peers' drinking; their individual

answers were contrasted first with 2021 data and then with trend-level information for 2016–21 and its implications for declining alcohol use.

The vaccine feedback group similarly guessed vaccine rates and beliefs and then was exposed to accurate vaccine data and trends. The participants rated the interventions for satisfaction and engagement. After one month, 253 participants responded to a follow-up survey, again assessing their perceptions of peers' drinking behaviors and their alcohol use.

Participants in the alcohol feedback group reported substantially changed perceptions of their peers' drinking, including a 26% reduction in perceived drinks per week. Their own reported alcohol use also declined: a 38% relative reduction in drinks per week, a 39% relative drop in drinking frequency, and a 63% reduction in driving after drinking.

Heavy episodic drinking did not significantly change, perhaps reflecting low rates at baseline. The effects of the intervention did not seem to be influenced by baseline drinking level, and lighter-drinking participants did not show increased alcohol use a month later.

Overall, the participants liked the alcohol intervention and considered it helpful and engaging; 90% said they would recommend it to a friend. The participants of the vaccination group, in contrast, did not report changing perceptions of alcohol use or shifts in their [drinking](#).

The findings support the potential effectiveness of personalized feedback leveraging dynamic norms—when behavioral norms are trending in a favorable direction—in reducing alcohol consumption among community-based young adults.

Further research is needed to compare this novel dynamic norms

[intervention](#) approach to the current 'status quo' personalized normative feedback approach that only provides static norms information without the recent trends. It is not known whether the current findings generalize to vaccinated [young adults](#), though the researchers do not anticipate major differences.

More information: S. Graupensperger et al, A brief dynamic norms intervention for young adult alcohol use: Pilot testing acceptability, efficacy, and iatrogenic effects, *Alcohol: Clinical & Experimental Research* (2023), [DOI: 10.1111/acer.15202](https://doi.org/10.1111/acer.15202)

Provided by Research Society on Alcoholism

Citation: Young adults report lower alcohol use after learning that drinking is declining among their peers (2023, December 11) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-12-young-adults-alcohol-declining-peers.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.