

# Young people's fluctuating beliefs on alcohol's effects influence their drinking and consequences

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College students' beliefs around the likelihood and desirability of alcohol's effects vary over time, and predict drinking level and

consequences, according to a study in *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*. The decision to drink is influenced by a person's alcohol expectancies—their beliefs about the likelihood of experiencing positive and negative effects when drinking. Expecting positive or favorable effects ("positive expectancies") has been associated with greater drinking and negative consequences. Another influence on drinking is expectancy valuation—a person's beliefs about how good or bad certain outcomes of alcohol use would be. Similar to expectancies, more positive valuations are linked to greater alcohol use. Previous studies examined alcohol expectancies and valuations at a single timepoint or over a short time period only—potentially missing important shifts in beliefs and drinking outcomes that may occur over a longer timeframe. Further, few studies have examined the role of negative expectancies and valuations, or potential differences among men and women. To address these gaps, researchers at the University of Washington, Seattle sought to evaluate the dynamic relationship of alcohol expectancies, valuations and outcomes over one year among male and female college student drinkers.

The researchers used data from 433 [college students](#) (average age 20) from two west coast universities who reported at least one heavy [drinking](#) episode within the past month. The students completed surveys at baseline and after 3, 6 and 12 months to report on their recent alcohol use (assessed as "weekly drinking", i.e. average number of drinks per week), alcohol beliefs, and negative drinking consequences. For expectancies and valuations, students rated the likelihood and desirability of 38 potential drinking outcomes. Positive expectancies and valuations included sociability (e.g. "I would be outgoing"), tension reduction ("I would feel relaxed"), liquid courage ("I would feel courageous") and sexuality ("I would feel sexy"); negative expectancies and valuations included cognitive and behavioral impairment (e.g. "I would be clumsy"), risk and aggression (e.g. "I would act aggressively"), and self-perception (e.g. "I would feel moody"). For negative

consequences of drinking, students reported how often they had experienced each of 23 outcomes (such as "neglected your responsibilities", "had a fight/argument/bad feelings with a friend") within the past three months.

The students varied substantially over time in their alcohol expectancies and valuations, with women showing more variability than men. Both positive and negative expectancies and valuations were important correlates of alcohol use and consequences. Weekly drinking was higher at timepoints where participants held relatively greater expectancies for sociability, sexuality, and risk/aggression, but lower when participants expected greater effects on self-perception. Students experienced more negative consequences at timepoints where they held relatively greater expectancies for sexuality and self-perception. Weekly drinking was higher when students reported more favorable [valuation](#) of risk/aggression, and [negative consequences](#) were greater when they reported more favorable valuation of self-perception. No expectancies or valuations were associated with fewer consequences of drinking, and several associations differed among men and women.

Understanding the risk factors for alcohol use in young adults is important for reducing risky drinking and its consequences. The current findings have important clinical implications and could inform interventions designed to challenge young people's beliefs around alcohol. Many interventions to date have focused on reducing positive expectancies, but the current findings suggest that negative expectancies, as well as [alcohol](#) valuations, could also be malleable targets for intervention. Intervention approaches should also be tailored to men and women.

**More information:** Nicole R. Schultz et al, Effects of within- and between-person assessments of alcohol expectancies and valuations on use and consequences moderated by sex, *Alcoholism: Clinical and*

*Experimental Research* (2021). [DOI: 10.1111/acer.14677](https://doi.org/10.1111/acer.14677)

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