

Risks associated with alcohol and marijuana use among college student athletes: The case for involving athletic personnel in prevention and intervention

MAJOR FINDINGS:

Student athletes are at risk for excessive alcohol use during college, which can lead to poorer overall health as well as injuries that can reduce performance and prevent full participation in athletic activities.^{1,2} However, little is known about marijuana use among athletes and how it, in addition to alcohol use, can impact athletic performance. This study describes student athletes' alcohol and marijuana use patterns and how these patterns are related to academic performance and risk for injury.

A total of 12,510 undergraduate students, including 1,233 athletes, completed four annual online surveys as part of a multi-site campus initiative (2014-2017). Frequency and quantity of alcohol and marijuana use were measured using standard items and definitions. Alcohol-related injury, academic variables (GPA and class attendance), and demographic characteristics were also measured.

After controlling for demographic variables, athlete status was associated with consuming more drinks when drinking but not with drinking more frequently compared with their non-athlete peers. Significantly more athletes binge drank during the past month compared with non-athletes (53% vs. 41%) and 18% of athletes engaged in high intensity drinking—drinking at a level twice the binge threshold—during the past month, nearly twice as high as non-athletes (10%). Marijuana use during the past year was significantly less prevalent among student athletes compared with non-athletes (29% vs. 33%).

Approximately 13% of student athletes had experienced an alcohol-related injury during the past year, with 21% of student athletes who binge drank during the past month experiencing an injury. Past-month binge drinkers had a significantly lower mean GPA than student athletes who did not drink (3.27 vs. 3.38). A lower GPA was also observed among student athletes who used marijuana during the past year compared

with athletes who did not use marijuana (3.24 vs. 3.35). Marijuana use, but not binge drinking, was related to skipping class. Skipping class “sometimes or regularly” was reported by 29% of student athletes who used marijuana vs. 14% of non-users. These results are consistent with prior research that indicates a connection between substance use during college and decreased academic achievement as well as that excessive drinking can contribute to injury risk among college athletes.

Of major interest to:

- College Administrators
- Parents
- Educators
- Health Professionals
- Students
- Law and Policy Makers



Practice and Policy Suggestions:

Colleges should tailor comprehensive substance use interventions that include screening and intervention for student athletes. A public health framework can be used to address marijuana and excessive alcohol use and related consequences among college athletes. Training college athletic personnel to build their skills in identifying student athletes at risk for excessive drinking and associated harms is feasible. They have a unique and influential role in shaping team and individual player behaviors and norms³⁻⁷ that is advantageous for intervening with student athletes. Such trainings can also build and strengthen their communication skills and ability to refer students to on-campus support or intervention.

This paper describes a training for athletic personnel that involved educational and role-playing components. The goal of the training was to learn how to have meaningful conversations related to alcohol and marijuana use. Future research should evaluate how training components could be refined to best fit athletic personnel's needs and their impact on student outcomes.

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