

# Heavy drinking and polydrug use among college students

## MAJOR FINDINGS:

Historically, researchers have categorized college students as binge drinkers or not binge drinkers, based on the threshold of 5 drinks in a sitting for men and 4 for women. Given how prevalent binge drinking is on college campuses, the researchers of this study believed that a more nuanced measure of alcohol use among college students would be helpful. Research gathered from 462 students was used to create this new scale. Students were asked about the typical number of drinks they consume per drinking day, illicit drug use, and nonmedical prescription drug use. The researchers created four categories to describe alcohol use patterns:

- lifetime nondrinkers
- light drinkers (1-4 drinks per day)
- moderate drinkers (5-9 drinks per day)
- and heavy drinkers (10 or more drinks per day).

The resulting groups were 51 nondrinkers, 182 light drinkers, 173 moderate drinkers, and 56 heavy drinkers. Drug use was extremely low in the group of students who had never consumed alcohol so their results were excluded from the analyses. As is shown in Table 1, lifetime use of tobacco and marijuana was relatively high in this sample of college drinkers whereas lifetime use of the remaining six drugs was substantially lower. The table also displays sizeable differences in the frequency of lifetime use of all eight drugs between the three different alcohol use pattern groups.

The researchers also discovered that light drinkers were significantly less likely to have used any of the eight drugs than heavy drinkers. Moderate drinkers were more likely to have used five of the eight drugs than light drinkers, the three exceptions being ecstasy, amphetamines, and cocaine. Heavy and moderate drinkers differed for only four drugs: ecstasy, amphetamines, prescription analgesics, and prescription stimulants. The effects of age, race, and gender were held constant in all analyses.

**Practice and Policy Suggestions:** Treatment providers should screen for drug use in patients suspected of abusing alcohol because the data suggest a strong correlation between heavy drinking patterns and polydrug use. It is very important that the prevention efforts aimed towards younger students continue through high school and college. College administrators should prioritize implementation of secondary prevention efforts targeting moderate and heavy drinkers. For example, college administrators should emphasize the dangerous effects of mixing alcohol with other drugs as well as enforcing disciplinary measures that help limit excessive drinking on college campuses.

### *Of major interest to:*

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



(Practice and Policy Suggestions cont.): The research presented here shows the usefulness of a more thorough classification system than the traditional binge-drinking definition. Researchers and treatment providers should focus less on defining students as binge drinkers or not, and more on understanding the individual's overall substance use patterns. Applying a more nuanced classification system will be beneficial for prevention efforts and the clinical risk assessment of college student drinkers.

**Table 1. Frequencies (percentages) for lifetime use of eight drugs in the total sample and the three alcohol use pattern groups**

	Total Sample (n = 411)	Alcohol Use Pattern Group		
		Light (n = 182)	Moderate (n = 173)	Heavy (n = 56)
Tobacco	268 (65%)	87 (48%)	134 (78%)	47 (84%)
Marijuana	251 (61%)	65 (36%)	138 (80%)	48 (86%)
Analgesics	70(17%)	12 (7%)	34 (20%)	24 (43%)
Stimulants	62 (15%)	10 (6%)	31 (18%)	21 (38%)
Hallucinogens	60 (15%)	10 (6%)	29 (17%)	21 (38%)
Ecstasy	39 (10%)	12 (7%)	15 (9%)	12 (21%)
Cocaine	34 (8%)	6 (3%)	15 (9%)	13 (23%)
Amphetamines	27 (7%)	6 (3%)	9 (5%)	12 (21%)

Note. Percentages for alcohol use pattern groups represent the percentage in that group who had used in their lifetime.

The complete publication referenced in this research brief can be found here: O'Grady, K.E., Arria, A.M., Fitzelle, D.B., Wish, E.D. (2008). Heavy drinking and polydrug use among college students. *Journal of Drug Issues*. 38(2), 445-466.



### About the College Life Study (CLS)

The CLS is a longitudinal study of 1,253 college students at a large, public, mid-Atlantic university. This study is one of the first large-scale scientific investigations that aims to discover the impact of health-related behaviors during the college experience. Any first time, first-year student between 17 and 19 years old at the university in the fall of 2004 was eligible to participate in a screening survey. The researchers then selected students to participate in the longitudinal study, which consisted of two-hour personal interviews administered annually, beginning with their first year of college. A full description of the methods used is available.<sup>1</sup> Inherent to all self-reporting research methods is the possibility for response bias. Because the sample is from one large university, the ability to generalize the findings elsewhere is uncertain. However, response rates have been excellent and attrition bias has been minimal.

For more information about the study, please visit [www.cls.umd.edu](http://www.cls.umd.edu) or contact Amelia M. Arria at the University of Maryland School of Public Health at [aarria@umd.edu](mailto:aarria@umd.edu).

<sup>1</sup> Arria, A.M., Caldeira, K.M., O'Grady, K.E., Vincent, K.B., Fitzelle, D.B., Johnson, E.P., Wish, E.D. (2008). Drug exposure opportunities and use patterns among college students: Results of a longitudinal prospective cohort study. *Substance Abuse*. 29(4), 19-38.

\*The findings presented in this article are from the pilot phase of the study.

*This research brief was prepared by Ilana Yergin, University of Maryland School of Journalism*

