

# College students rarely seek help despite serious substance use problems

## MAJOR FINDINGS:

Many college students suffer from substance use disorders (SUD). It is rare that college students with SUD recognize they need help or actually seek help for their substance use problems, although most attempt behavior change on their own. Pressure from parents, friends, or others is associated with help-seeking although rates of help-seeking escalate significantly when self-recognition of a need for help occurs. College students who do seek help tend to look to educational programs first, followed by professional resources and twelve-step programs.

Researchers confirmed previous findings of widespread substance use problems on college campuses with large proportions of college students meeting criteria for SUD. Annual prevalence of SUD increased from 23.6% of students in their first year to 35.0% in their third year, with nearly one-half of students (46.8%) meeting criteria for alcohol or marijuana SUD at least once during their first three years as undergraduates (see Table).

Annual and cumulative weighted prevalence of SUD involving alcohol and/or marijuana during the first 3 years of college<sup>a</sup>

SUD	Year 1 (% <sub>wr</sub> )	Year 2 (% <sub>wr</sub> )	Year 3 (% <sub>wr</sub> )	Cumulative (% <sub>wr</sub> )
Alcohol use disorders	19.3	26.5	30.9	44.0
Marijuana use disorders	9.3	12.8	14.2	19.2
Any substance use disorder (alcohol or marijuana)	23.6	30.7	35.0	46.8

<sup>a</sup> Results are presented as the weighted percent of participants based on data from a high-risk sample of 946 individuals who provided complete data in all 3 years and weighted to represent the general population of screened students in the target population ( $n_{wr} = 2,494$ ).

Third-year college students were asked about what, if anything, motivated them to seek help or treatment for substance use problems since beginning college. Help-seeking was rare among the 548 SUD cases identified (8.8%), but was significantly higher among individuals who experienced social pressure from parents (32.5%), friends (34.2%), or another person (58.3%). Only 3.6% perceived a need for help—meaning they thought they needed help or treatment for their substance use problems—but help-seeking was considerably higher among those students (90.0%).

The researchers asked the students if they had wanted or tried to cut back or stop drinking alcohol in the past year and whether they had wanted or tried to set limits on how much or how often they would drink, and if those attempts were successful. Responses to these questions were used as indicators of self-change behaviors, meaning the student had made at least some attempt on their own to change their substance use behavior. In most cases, self-change behaviors were attempted at least once, either successfully (36.3%) or unsuccessfully (54.2%), whereas only 9.5% never attempted any self-change.

### Of major interest to:

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



**Practice and Policy Suggestions:** The results of this study highlight the need to better understand what motivates young adults to seek help or treatment for a substance use disorder. Armed with a better understanding of the motivations behind seeking treatment, health professionals and campus administrators will be able to identify and reach out to students in need of help. Early intervention opportunities could include educational programs to improve problem recognition and desire to change by students with SUD. The programs could also be designed to help students recognize SUD in their friends and peers. A wider range of on-campus help options is also suggested, including treatment and use of brief interventions, which have been exhaustively studied and found appropriate for college students when used by trained professionals. On-line helping tools are suggested for a population shown to be treatment-averse and secretive. For parents of college students, the same educational efforts are suggested along with helping tools stressing the importance of maintaining the parent-child connection even into college.

The complete publication referenced in this research brief can be found here: Caldeira, K.M., Kasperski, S.J., Sharma, E., Vincent, K.B., O'Grady, K.E., Wish, E.D., Arria, A.M. (2009). College students rarely seek help despite serious substance use problems. *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*. 37(4), 368-378.



## 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, College Park, 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.

*This research brief was prepared by Ilana Yergin, University of Maryland School of Journalism and disseminated by the Treatment Research Institute (TRI), a non-profit research and development group specializing in science-driven transformation of treatment and policy in substance use/abuse. Click [here](#) to learn more about TRI.*

