

Prospective associations between alcohol and drug consumption and risky sex among female college students

MAJOR FINDINGS:

The term “risky sex” is broad and encompasses a number of behaviors that place a person at risk for unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted infection (STI), sexual violence, or other adverse outcomes. Some risky sex behaviors are having sex without a condom, having numerous sex partners, having sex with a stranger, and having sex while under the influence of alcohol. This study uses data collected from 386 unmarried female college students, all of whom had vaginal sex at least once in their lifetime. At the time of the first interview, nearly one third of the students (31.4%) had multiple sex partners in the past six months. This number remained relatively stable at year two with 32.4% having had multiple sex partners in the past six months. The number of respondents who did not use a condom every time increased from year one to year two (48.9% to 61.1%). Although the number of respondents who reported having intoxicated sex, meaning they used drugs or alcohol before sex, remained stable from year one to year two, it is still a surprisingly high percent at 60.2% and 63.6%, respectively.

The researchers noticed high rates of initiation and persistence for all three behaviors with respect to changes in risky sex over time. 23.9% of individuals who had fewer than two sex partners in year one had multiple sex partners in year two. Initiation rates for condom non-use and intoxicated sex were even higher (41.8% and 36.0%, respectively). “With respect to persistence, individuals continuing the behavior from year one to year two were in the majority for having multiple sex partners (52.7%), condom non-use (78.8%), and intoxicated sex (86.0%).” The researchers find the fact that most women continued the behavior from one year to the next particularly important.

Practice and Policy Suggestions: “This study provides strong evidence that college is a period of rapid escalation in risky sex among females as well as a time of rapid acquisition of new risky sex behaviors.” The researchers find this to be a particularly troubling finding because these behaviors seem to persist from one year to the next. These findings demonstrate the need for safer-sex educational programs during college. Safer-sex educational programs should cover topics such as how to talk about sex and condoms and the responsible use of alcohol and other drugs. It is important to note that drug use – not just drinking – may be a contributing factor for some college women’s risky sex behaviors.

Of major interest to:

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



(Practice and Policy Suggestions cont.): Drug use therefore needs to be addressed in these educational programs. The researchers suggest that in addition to teaching safer-sex behaviors, female college students should also be educated and empowered with the ability to change past risky behaviors. “Campus health professionals have a unique opportunity to positively influence the sexual health of female college students during a critical period in their sexual development.” According to national data collected by the American College Health Association, in spite of the fact that health center staff and health educators are highly trusted by college students, only a minority of students actually receive information from their school regarding pregnancy prevention (22.5%), HIV (28.0%), and other STIs (35.8%). College health professionals should take advantage of having students as a captive audience and confront these issues.

The complete publication referenced in this research brief can be found here: Caldeira, K.M., Arria, A.M., O’Grady, K.E., Zarate, E.M., Vincent, K.B., Wish, E.D. (2009). Prospective associations between alcohol and drug consumption and risky sex among female college students. *Journal of Alcohol and Drug Education*. 53(2), 71-92



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.¹ 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 or contact Amelia M. Arria at the University of Maryland, College Park, at aarria@umd.edu.

¹ 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.

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