

## Teenage Alcoholism Can Have Lifelong Effects

Young drinkers less likely to seek treatment, more likely to relapse, study finds



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THURSDAY, Sept. 7 (HealthDay News) -- Becoming alcoholic as a teenager doesn't just spell a booze-soaked adolescence.

It can also portend trouble for decades, apparently contributing to more severe levels of alcoholism and a reluctance to seek help, a new federal study found.

The study revealed that 58 percent of those interviewed who became alcoholics before age 18 became drunk at least once a week during adult episodes of dependence, compared to 19 percent of those who became alcoholics at age 30 or older.

"This tells us that it's very important to try to delay the onset of drinking," said study author Ralph W. Hingson, director of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism's division of epidemiology and prevention research. "That's not to say there aren't some who become dependent at an early age and overcome the problem. It's just more difficult."

An estimated 12.5 percent of Americans are alcoholics or have been so during their lives, according to federal statistics. And previous studies have linked teenage drinking to a variety of ills, from smoking and drug use to fights, car accidents and unprotected sex.

In the new study, the researchers examined the results of a 2001-2002 survey by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism that included 43,093 people over the age of 18. The researchers zeroed in on face-to-face interviews with 4,778 people who appeared to have been alcoholics at some time in their lives.

Of all the people who were ever alcoholics, 15 percent appeared to have become dependent before the age of 18, while 47 percent were dependent before age 21.

"The thing that is probably most surprising to the general population is that these problems begin so early," Hingson said. "The conventional image is that people who have alcoholism or alcohol dependence are middle-aged. That's not the case. The problem begins much earlier in life."

The study findings are published in the September issue of *Pediatrics*.

The researchers found that those drinkers who became alcoholics before 18 were more likely to show more symptoms of alcoholism later in life: 44 percent displayed six to seven symptoms, compared to 33 percent of those who became dependent on alcohol after age 30.

The researchers adjusted the figures to account for other possible influences such as race, gender and family history of alcoholism.

Compared to those drinkers who became addicted after age 30, the early alcoholics were also more likely to want to continue drinking (26 percent vs. 16 percent among the older group); thought they didn't need help (44 percent vs. 30 percent); and didn't know where to turn for help (14 percent vs. 3 percent).

It's not clear why people who drink heavily earlier are at higher risk later in life, but it may have something to do with biologic changes in the brain due to alcohol consumption, Hingson said.

The study does have weaknesses. It doesn't definitively suggest a cause-and-effect relationship between teenage alcoholism and alcohol dependence later in life. And it relies on people's recollections about a sensitive subject -- alcoholism.

Still, the study included a large number of people, and the question format that was used for the survey doesn't mean the results are invalid, said Dr. J.C. Garbutt, a professor of psychiatry at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

What should you do if a teen you know is having problems with alcohol? "Talk with them about it, and if it is serious, get help for them," Garbutt said. "Stick with it even if the adolescent doesn't want treatment -- and few do. The alternative could be serious alcoholism with risk of legal, health, relationship problems and even death."

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