

Problems of alcohol and drug use and of risk-taking behaviour

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Leading causes of morbidity and mortality in young adults are intentional and unintentional injury, tobacco use, alcohol and drug use, sexual behaviours that contribute to unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, unhealthy dietary habits, and physical inactivity.

The Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study showed that weekly drinking among boys rises with age to over a tenth in six WHO European region countries at age 11, to a fifth in eight countries at age 13, and to over a third in nineteen countries at age 15.

Most alcohol-related problems that affect young people do not relate to chronic heavy drinking but to periodic heavy drinking and intoxication. Only a minority of young adults—mostly males—drink heavily on a regular basis and thereby expose themselves and others to risk.

Targeted surveys have shown that particular groups of young people have much higher levels of drug use than those found in the general national population. These are often young people who have been excluded from school or truanted, committed a crime, been homeless or run

away from home, and those whose siblings are drug users. Young people who go out at night to particular dance music settings constitute another vulnerable group.

Young adults report more social problems than middle-aged respondents for a given level of drinking. The variety of alcohol-related and drug-related social problems includes problems with the family, with friendships and at work, financial difficulties and confrontations with law-enforcement agents. The probability of social consequences rises with the level of drinking and drug use.

Research indicates that certain personality types may engage in higher levels of risk-taking behaviours. Youth identified with substance problems are more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviour during adolescence and to continue in risky sexual behaviours to the extent that substance problems persist.

The effects of alcohol on risk-taking tend to increase the probability of aggressive or violent response in certain situations, engagement in crimes such as robbery, and choosing to drive while impaired.

One of the factors that promotes successful adjustment in adolescence is good parenting; consisting of close parental monitoring, frequent communication about important issues, and regular daily involvement and interaction between parent and adolescent. Siblings are another important and influential reference group that influences the substance use of younger siblings. Research in this area indicates that substance use by siblings increases the likelihood of adolescent use.

As peer relationships serve as reference groups, they are as essential to the shaping of personality as the family is in childhood. Peer disapproval of alcohol and marijuana use has been found to be associated with less frequent use of alcohol and marijuana use.

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