



[National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism \(NIAAA\)](#)

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NIH-supported studies show online course helps reduce harmful college drinking

An online alcohol prevention course can help reduce harmful drinking among college freshmen, but the benefits in the fall don't last through the spring, according to a study supported by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), part of the National Institutes of Health.

Led by Mallie J. Paschall, Ph.D., and colleagues at the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation in Berkeley, Calif., the research evaluated the effectiveness of a commercially available Internet-based alcohol misuse prevention course known as AlcoholEdu. The researchers had no connection with the company that developed and sells the course.

"Our findings indicate that this course can be a useful component of an overall strategy that combines campus-wide and environmental interventions to prevent harmful drinking by college students," says Dr. Paschall.

The course consists of five modules, four of which are typically offered in the late summer before freshmen arrive on campus, and one module that students complete during the early fall semester. The modules include instruction on the definition of a standard drink; the physiologic effects of alcohol; social influences on alcohol use; alcohol laws; feedback to correct misperceptions about college drinking norms; and alcohol harm-reduction strategies.

As reported in the Sept., 2011 issue of the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, Dr. Paschall and colleagues conducted a randomized trial of the course at 30 public and private universities in the United States. Incoming freshmen at half of the universities took the course, while students at the other schools served as controls and received whatever alcohol prevention programs those schools normally provide to new students. An average of 90 students at each campus subsequently participated in periodic surveys that assessed their past-30-day alcohol use, average number of drinks per occasion, and binge drinking frequency.

"Prior studies have shown that the freshman year is a particularly risky time for hazardous drinking among college students," notes Ralph Hingson, Sc.D., director of the NIAAA division of epidemiology and prevention research. "There is a need for effective prevention strategies that are timed to address this problem."

The researchers found that students who took the online course reported significantly reduced alcohol use and binge drinking during the fall semester, compared with control students. These beneficial effects, however, did not persist into the spring semester.

"These findings represent one hopeful step in the long journey to address this complex issue," says NIAAA Acting Director Kenneth R. Warren, Ph.D. "Each year approximately 1,825 college students die from alcohol-related unintentional injuries; 696,000 students are assaulted by another student who has been drinking; and 97,000 students are victims of alcohol-related sexual assault or date rape."

"Lack of course effects in the following spring suggests that, by itself, the course may be insufficient to sustain effects over time, or perhaps that its benefit is eventually overcome by students' exposure to alcohol and peer drinking behavior," says Dr. Paschall.

Dr. Paschall's research group also recently reported that AlcoholEdu appeared to have beneficial short-term effects on sexual assault and other forms of victimization, as well as the most common types of alcohol-related physiological and social problems among freshmen. Those findings, from the same 30-university study population, were published in the July issue of the Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs. The study also found more beneficial effects of the AlcoholEdu course at schools where the course was mandated for incoming freshmen and at least 70 percent of freshmen completed all course modules.

"These findings," adds Dr. Warren, "are consistent with previous NIAAA-funded research that found that, while educational components are integral to some successful college drinking interventions, they do not appear to be effective in isolation."

The researchers conclude their recent findings suggest that use of the Internet-based prevention course should be reinforced with effective environmental prevention strategies. Examples of such strategies include reducing alcohol availability, raising prices, and limiting alcohol promotions and advertising on and around campus.

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, part of the National Institutes of Health, is the primary U.S. agency for conducting and supporting research on the causes, consequences, prevention, and treatment of alcohol abuse, alcoholism, and alcohol problems. NIAAA also disseminates research findings to general, professional, and academic audiences. Additional alcohol research information and publications are available at www.niaaa.nih.gov.

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Evaluation of an Internet-Based Alcohol Misuse Prevention Course for College Freshmen: Findings of a Randomized Multi-Campus Trial

Mallie J. Paschall, Tamar Antin, Christopher L. Ringwalt, Robert F. Saltz
American Journal of Preventive Medicine
Volume 41, Issue 3, Pages 300-308 (September 2011)

Effects of AlcoholEdu for College on Alcohol-Related Problems Among Freshmen: A Randomized Multicampus Trial

Mallie J. Paschall, Tamar Antin, Christopher L. Ringwalt, Robert F. Saltz
Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs
(July 2011)

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