

College students are bingeing to extremes

More than 24 drinks at a time not uncommon, study shows

With millions of high school seniors entering college this month, university administrators need to be vigilant in combating extremely hazardous drinking that new research shows is worse among freshman males.

While drinking among college students has been recognized as a serious problem on college campuses, a study by the Prevention Research Center of the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation shows that many students drink at levels high enough to cause catastrophic health consequences. Youngest students are at the greatest risk, and the worst problems occur at the beginning of the academic year.

Past research on binge drinking has looked only at consumption of five drinks or more, without quantifying how much more. As it turns out, some students may drink a lot more. A recent survey of college students in California found that among 1,000 male college drinkers, there are 50 or more occasions per month in which 24 or more drinks may be consumed.

“These are levels of drinking at which most men will have passed out or become comatose,” says Paul J. Gruenewald, Ph.D., senior researcher at the Berkeley, CA-based Prevention Research Center. “These are levels at which drinkers are at risk for the very serious problems posed by peak drinking, including alcohol poisoning. When you see just how much some students may drink, it’s easier to understand how these young people may suffer from many alcohol-related accidents and injuries, some as simple as falling out of a dormitory window.”

With funding from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), Dr. Gruenewald has studied the characteristics of those drinkers most likely to drink to these peak levels. Using self-reports of drinking from college students, it becomes clear just how much high-risk drinking occurs. Results of the study indicate that college drinkers may have 12 or more drinks on about 10 percent of drinking occasions. Male college drinkers may have 12 or more drinks on 20 percent of these occasions. At these highest levels, both immediate and long-term risks related to alcohol use are greatly increased.

While the heaviest drinking occurs among freshman males, and at the beginning of each academic year, by senior year, drinking appears to have moderated.

Prevention efforts such as responsible beverage sales and service, reductions in the numbers of outlets that sell alcohol around campuses, and police enforcement programs that deter underage drinking and sales to minors can be effective. These strategies can be made even more effective when policy makers understand the extremely dangerous drinking that occurs among young students.

“We would like to see many fewer reports of student tragedies related to extremely high levels of drinking,” Dr. Gruenewald said. “Our new understanding of peak drinking among college students can pave the way towards better college prevention programs.”

About Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation

Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation (PIRE) is a nonprofit organization specializing in conducting research related to health and social issues and translating

science into practice in solution of real-world problems. The organization's focus includes individual and social problems, issues related to public health and safety and the applications of social policy. Areas of specialty include: treatment and prevention of drug and alcohol abuse, driving under the influence, tobacco use, adolescent high-risk behavior, domestic violence and abuse, and the economic costs associated with these problems.