

Substance Use and Sexual Health Among Teens and Young Adults in the U.S.

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Sexual activity and substance use are not uncommon among youth today. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 79 percent of high-school students report having experimented with alcohol at least once, and a quarter report frequent drug use.^{1,2} Half of all 9th-12th graders have had sexual intercourse, and 65 percent will by the time they graduate.³ While it has been difficult to show a direct causal relationship, there is some evidence that alcohol and drug use by young people is associated with risky sexual activity.

Risky Sexual Behaviors and Substance Use

Sexual Initiation

- Current data suggest that those who engage in any “risk behaviors” tend to take part in more than one, and that many health risk behaviors occur in combination with other risky activities.⁴
- Prior substance use increases the probability that an adolescent will initiate sexual activity, and sexually experienced adolescents are more likely to initiate substance use – including alcohol and cigarettes.⁵
- Teens who use alcohol or drugs are more likely to have sex than those who do not: Adolescents who drink are seven times more likely, while those who use illicit substances are five times more likely – even after adjusting for age, race, gender, and parental educational level.⁶
- Up to 18 percent of young people aged 13 to 19 report that they were drinking at the time of first intercourse.⁷ Among teens aged 14 to 18 who reported having used alcohol before age fourteen, 20 percent said they had sex at age fourteen or earlier, compared with seven percent of other teens.⁸
- One-quarter of sexually active 9-12th grade students report using alcohol or drugs during their last sexual encounter, with males more likely than females to have done so (31% vs. 19%).³
- For a significant proportion of adults aged 18 to 30, having sex and heavy drinking occur together in a single episode. Among men, 35 percent said they had sex when consuming five to eight drinks, compared with 17 percent of those who had one or two drinks. Among women aged 18 to 30, 39 percent had sex while consuming five to eight drinks, compared with 14 percent of women who had one or two drinks.⁹

Unprotected Sex

- Thirty-eight percent (38%) of sexually active teenage women and 26 percent of women aged 20 to 24 rely on the condom as their contraceptive method, making

it second only to the pill (used by 44% of teens and 52% of young adults).¹⁰

- Research on the association between condom use and substance use is mixed. According to one analysis of a large national sample of high school students, sexually active adolescents who use alcohol and/or drugs are somewhat less likely than other students to have used a condom the last time they had sex. However, the differences were not statistically significant after controlling for other factors.¹
- The more substances that sexually active teens and young adults have *ever* tried, the less likely they are to have used a condom the last time they had sex: Among those aged 14 to 22, 78 percent of boys and 67 percent of girls who reported never using a substance said that they used a condom, compared with only 35 percent of boys and 23 percent of girls who reported ever having used five substances.¹¹
- Teen girls and young women aged 14 to 22 who have *recently* used multiple substances are less likely to have used a condom the last time they had sex: 26 percent of young women with four recent alcohol or drug use behaviors reported using a condom at last intercourse, compared with 44 percent of those who reported no recent alcohol or drug use.¹¹

Multiple Partners

- For teenagers as well as adults aged 18 to 30, having multiple sexual partners has been associated with both ever-use and current use of alcohol or other substances.¹¹
- Thirty-nine percent (39%) of sexually active students in 9th-12th grades who report ever using alcohol have had sex with four or more partners, compared with 29 percent of students who never drink.⁶
- Forty-four percent (44%) of sexually active students in 9th-12th grades who report ever using drugs have had sex with four or more partners, compared with 24 percent of students who use drugs.⁶
- Among sexually active young people aged 14 to 22 who used a substance the *last* time they had intercourse, 61 percent of men and 44 percent of women had had multiple partners during the three months prior to being surveyed, compared with 32 percent of men and 14 percent of women who did not use drugs or alcohol the last time they had sex.¹¹
- Sexually active women aged 14 to 22 who *recently* used alcohol or drugs four times are more likely than those who do not drink or take drugs to have had

more than one sex partner in the last three months (48% compared with 8%).¹¹ The number of different substances women aged 14 to 22 use in their lifetimes significantly increases their likelihood of having multiple sex partners.⁴ Among 18 to 22-year-old men and women, an earlier age at initiation of alcohol use is associated with the later likelihood of having multiple sex partners. For example, among those who reported having initiated alcohol use at age 10 or younger, 44 percent of men and 31 percent of women said they had had more than one sex partner in the three months prior to the survey, compared with 37 percent of men and 12 percent of women who said that they first drank alcohol at age 17 or older.¹¹

Unintended Consequences

Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs)

- There are approximately fifteen million new cases of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) annually in the United States. About two-thirds of new cases occur among adolescents and young adults under 25,^{12,13} a group that is also more likely to engage in both risky sexual activity and alcohol and drug use.
- Young women may be biologically more susceptible to chlamydia, gonorrhea, and HIV than older women.¹³
- In a single act of unprotected sex with an infected partner, a teenage woman has a one percent risk of acquiring HIV, a 30 percent risk of getting genital herpes, and a 50 percent chance of contracting gonorrhea.¹⁴

Unintended Pregnancy

- Substance use and unintended pregnancies often occur among the same populations.¹
- Fifty-five percent of teenagers say that having sex while drinking or on drugs is often a reason for unplanned teen pregnancies.^{1,15}
- Almost one million adolescents – or 19 percent of those who have had sexual intercourse – become pregnant each year.¹⁶ Among women aged 15 to 19, 78 percent of pregnancies are believed to be unintended, accounting for about one-quarter of all accidental pregnancies each year.¹⁷
- The pregnancy rate among women aged 20 to 24 is 183.3 per 1,000 women; it is thought that 59 percent of pregnancies in this age group are unintended.¹⁷

Sexual Assault and Violence

- Estimates of substance use during instances of sexual violence and rape in the general population range from 30 to 90 percent for alcohol use, and from 13 to 42 percent for the use of illicit substances.¹
- Alcohol use by the victim, perpetrator, or both, has been implicated in 46 to 75 percent of date rapes among college students.¹
- One survey of college students found that 78 percent of women had experienced sexual aggression (any type of sexual activity, including kissing, unwanted by the woman). Dates on which sexual aggression occurred were more likely to include heavy drinking or

drug use than those dates that were not marked by sexually aggressive activity.¹

- While 93% of teenage women report that their first intercourse was voluntary, one-quarter of these young women report that it was unwanted.¹⁸ Seven out of ten women who first had intercourse before age 13 say it was unwanted or nonvoluntary.¹⁸
- Compared with women in other age groups, women aged 19 to 29 report more violent incidents with intimate partners, for a rate of 21.3 violent victimizations per 1,000 women.¹⁹

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