Age of initiation to alcohol and alcohol-related problems in early adulthood: A prospective cohort study

Authors:

ALEXANDRA AIKEN¹, PHILIP J. CLARE¹, WING SEE YUEN¹, VERONICA BOLAND¹, CLARA DE TORRES¹, RAIMONDO BRUNO¹,², KYPROS KYPRIS³, JIM MCCAMBRIDGE⁴, LOUISA DEGENHARDT¹, TIM SLADE⁵, MONIKA WADOLOWSKI⁶, DELYSE HUTCHINSON⁷,⁸,⁹, JACKOB M. NAJMAN¹⁰, NYANDA MCBRIDE¹¹, RICHARD P. MATTICK¹, AMY PEACOCK¹²

¹National Drug & Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW Sydney, Sydney, Australia, ²School of Medicine, University of Tasmania, Hobart, Australia, ³Centre for Clinical Epidemiology and Biostatistics, School of Medicine and Public Health, University of Newcastle, Newcastle, Australia, ⁴Department of Health Sciences, University of York, York, United Kingdom, ⁵The Matilda Centre, University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia, ⁶School of Women’s & Children’s Health, UNSW Sydney, Sydney, Australia, ⁷Deakin University, Centre for Social and Early Emotional Development, School of Psychology, Faculty of Health, Geelong, Australia, ⁸Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, Royal Children’s Hospital, Victoria, Australia, ⁹University of Melbourne, Department of Paediatrics, Royal Children’s Hospital, Victoria, Australia, ¹⁰Queensland Alcohol and Drug Research and Education Centre, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia, ¹¹National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University, Perth, Australia

Presenter’s email: a.aiken@unsw.edu.au

Introduction and Aims:
Initiating alcohol use earlier in adolescence has been associated with an increased risk of binge drinking and higher quantity of alcohol consumption in later adolescence. The current study extends this work to examine associations between age of initiation and alcohol-related problems in early adulthood.

Design and Methods: This study uses data from the Australian Parental Supply of Alcohol Longitudinal Study which recruited 1,910 children at age 12-13 years. Of this cohort, 1,251 had initiated alcohol use and provided valid outcome data at wave 8 (age 20 years). Logistic regression models were used to examine associations between age of initiation to alcohol use (consuming at least 1 full serve; ≤13 years as referent versus 14-15, 16-17 or 18-19 years old) and binge drinking (>4 standard drinks on an occasion), alcohol-related harms, and symptoms of alcohol abuse and dependence, adjusting for a range of child, parent, family and peer covariates.

Results: A majority (71%) had initiated alcohol use prior to 18 years of age. At wave 8, 87% reported binge drinking in the past year. Adjusted logistic regression analyses indicated no significant associations between age of initiation and the four outcomes at wave 8.

Discussion and Conclusions:
Controlling for a range of confounders, we found no statistically significant association between age of alcohol initiation and alcohol related problems at age 20. This contrasts with findings observed in earlier adolescence and warrants further exploration across early adulthood, noting the challenges of studying predictors of binge-drinking - a behavior that is near ubiquitous by early adulthood.

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