

Study shows long-term drug abuse starts with alcohol

11 July 2012, by Allison Vitt

(Medical Xpress) -- Alcohol - not marijuana - is the gateway drug that leads adolescents down the path toward more serious substances, a new University of Florida study shows.

The findings may not settle a decades-old debate over how [drug abuse](#) begins, but it could help educators and policymakers build more effective drug-prevention programs, said Adam Barry, an assistant professor and researcher in the College of Health and Human Performance.

"By recognizing the important predictive role of [alcohol](#) and delaying initiation of alcohol use, school officials and public health leaders can positively impact the progression of substance use," he said. "I am confident in our findings and the clear implications they have for school-based prevention programs. By delaying and/or preventing the use of alcohol, these programs can indirectly reduce the rate of use of other [substances](#)."

The study appears in the August issue of the *Journal of School Health*.

Barry used a nationally representative sample of high school seniors, evaluating data collected through the annual Monitoring the Future study. The study, conducted by the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, uses questionnaires to examine the behaviors, attitudes and values of secondary school students, college students and young adults. Once collected, the data is made available for evaluation by other researchers and institutions.

Barry's study focused on data collected from 14,577 high school seniors from 120 public and private schools in the United States.

He evaluated whether the students had ever used any of 11 substances, including licit substances such as alcohol and tobacco, as well as illicit

substances like marijuana, cocaine, heroin, LSD, amphetamines, tranquilizers and other narcotics. The results indicated that alcohol, not marijuana or tobacco, was most often the first substance students tried, he said.

In the sample of students, alcohol also represented the most commonly used substance, with 72.2 percent of students reporting alcohol consumption at some point in their lifetime. Comparatively, 45 percent of students reported using tobacco, and 43.3 percent cited marijuana use.

In addition, the drug use documented found that substance use typically begins with the most socially acceptable drugs, such as alcohol and cigarettes, then proceeds to marijuana use and finally to other illegal, harder drugs. Moreover, the study showed that [students](#) who used alcohol exhibited a significantly greater likelihood - up to 16 times - of licit and illicit substance use.

"These findings add further credence to the literature identifying alcohol as the gateway drug to other substance use," he said.

Barry also cited the important role of parents and their alcohol-related attitudes and policies in the home.

"Parents should know that a strict, zero-tolerance policy at home is best. Increasing alcohol-specific rules and decreasing availability will help prevent an adolescent's alcohol use," he said. "The longer that alcohol initiation is delayed, the more likely that other drug or substance use will be delayed or prevented as well."

Provided by University of Florida

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