

# Educating college students on drinking risks can temporarily help lessen drinking behaviors

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Briefly counseling college students on the dangers of binge drinking is effective in lowering heavy drinking levels among many students, but only temporarily. Three out of four will be right back where they started a year later, according to new research published by the American Psychological Association.

Extremely heavy drinkers, mostly men who play [drinking](#) games and are the least concerned about their drinking, were also the least likely to respond to any short-term counseling efforts, according to the yearlong study of 1,040 college [students](#). The findings appear in the *APA Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*.

"This research will help other colleges and universities better understand who is least and best served by standard student alcohol interventions," said the study's lead author, James Henson, PhD, a psychology professor at Old Dominion University. "Brief prevention efforts can be effective but may require colleges to implement [intervention](#) boosters to maintain these effects."

Quick one-on-one and online counseling sessions have become popular ways for many universities to address the dangers associated with [heavy drinking](#) on campuses. But the long-term effectiveness of these sessions has not been thoroughly studied, according to the authors.

More than 690,000 [college students](#) each year are assaulted by another student who has been drinking and 1,825 die each year from alcohol-related unintentional injuries, according to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. More than 97,000 students are victims of alcohol-related sexual assault or date rape, according to the NIAAA.

The study involved students (53 percent male) enrolled at a private university in the Northeast. A third of the participants volunteered for the study while the rest were required to complete the counseling sessions for violating the university's alcohol policy. The students were randomly assigned to one of three interventions: a one-on-one brief counseling session, a computerized lab session or an online session. The type of counseling session, computerized or face-to-face, did not make a significant difference in the findings. Before the session, students were asked about their drinking behaviors, demographic information, peer drinking behaviors and whether they belonged to a fraternity or a sorority. They were interviewed again one, six and 12 months later. The participants were 87 percent white, 5 percent Asian, 3 percent Latino/a and 2 percent black. There were no significant differences in the findings based on race or ethnicity.

At the one month follow-up, most students (82 percent) reported drinking less than before the intervention. However, most of these participants (84 percent) also ended up increasing their drinking over the following 12 months until they were back to baseline levels.

The majority (76 percent) of students were relatively light drinkers, consuming about 16 drinks in their heaviest drinking weeks. These drinkers reduced their average alcohol intake by 25 percent after the intervention but returned to baseline drinking levels over a year. These students were usually younger, female and more inexperienced drinkers.

"Although interventions can be used successfully with this group of

students, intervention boosters may be necessary to maintain or increase the intervention efforts," said Henson.

About 11 percent of the participants were extremely heavy drinkers and did not reduce their drinking behaviors at all after the intervention. Averaging 32 alcoholic drinks on their heaviest drinking weeks, these were mostly freshman males who reported more drinking by their peers and said they were less concerned with their drinking levels. They were also more likely to play drinking games.

One of the smallest groups, only 3 percent, were the heaviest drinkers in the sample, with an average of 76 drinks a week. Interestingly, these drinkers reduced their drinking by almost half post-intervention and maintained that level on average at the one-year mark. These students were also mostly freshman males, fraternity members and more likely than other students in the study to use other drugs.

**More information:** "Defining and Characterizing Differences in College Alcohol Intervention Efficacy: A Growth Mixture Modeling Application;" James M. Henson, PhD, Old Dominion University; Matthew R. Pearson, PhD, University of New Mexico; Kate B. Carey, PhD, Brown University; *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*; online, Mar. 2, 2015.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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