

Alcohol and first sexual experience: Risks for young women

15 October 2015, by Cathy Wilde

If a young woman's first sexual experience involves alcohol, she is more likely to be at risk for problems such as sexual assault, and this risk may persist in her future, new research finds.

The study, authored by Jennifer A. Livingston, PhD, senior research scientist at the University at Buffalo Research Institute on Addictions (RIA), surveyed 228 women, ages 18 to 20, about their sexual experiences and drinking habits. The average age the women began drinking was 14 and the average age for first sexual intercourse was 16.

Livingston found that first [sexual experiences](#) involving alcohol were most likely to occur outside the context of a relationship (a "hook-up"), with a partner who was also using substances and after a social gathering involving alcohol. Alcohol-involved first experiences were less planned, less desired and rated more negatively overall than those not involving alcohol, which usually occurred in the context of a romantic relationship and were described as wanted, planned and more positive.

"Drinking to intoxication places adolescent females at increased risk through exposure to high-risk sexual partners found in drinking contexts such as parties. These partners may be significantly older, more aggressive, not well-known or substance users themselves," Livingston says. "Over time, these [young women](#) continued to use alcohol in conjunction with sex, which further exposed them to high-risk partners. In these contexts, there is less discussion of birth control and greater risk of [sexually transmitted diseases](#), [sexual assault](#) and unintended pregnancy."

Disturbingly, nearly 20 percent of the young women in the alcohol-involved group reported their first intercourse experiences were without consent, or rape. Even more troubling, these young women were found to be three times more likely to be victims of incapacitated rape in the future.

Livingston says this study raises questions about how schools and parents approach talking about drinking and sex. "Traditionally, substance use prevention efforts and [sexuality education](#) aimed at middle and [high school students](#) have been approached separately," Livingston says. "Results of this study suggest that it would be beneficial to combine the two. Alcohol-related risks should be addressed in sexuality education and sexual risks included in substance use prevention. Interventions aimed at delaying the initiation of alcohol use or reducing heavy drinking may have the added benefit of reducing [risky sexual behavior](#)."

Provided by University at Buffalo

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