

Lifewire: Study looks at genesis of alcohol abuse

by Ven Griva

The younger a boy is when he starts drinking alcohol, the more likely he will be a risky drinker as an adult, says the results of a four-year survey of male Marine Corps recruits that raises concerns for society at large.

The survey in the December issue of *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* identifies several other factors for drinking problems. They are tobacco use, coming from a small or rural hometown and growing up in a household where alcohol was abused.

YOUNG DRINKERS

About 2.3 percent of all 12-year-olds and 69.8 percent of all 21-year-olds reported in 2004 that they currently drank alcohol, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. Approximately 4.4 million Americans first used alcohol in 2004, 86.9 percent of them were under the age of 21.

CDC data shows that men 18 to 20, the age group from which most Marines are recruited, are the most likely group to abuse alcohol. Another study found that male Marines 18 to 25 drink heavily at twice the rate of civilians in the same age group.

You can see why alcohol use and abuse would concern the Pentagon in its search for a few good men.

LARGE SAMPLE

Dr. Sylvia Y.N. Young of the Naval Health Research Center in San Diego and colleagues studied the links between childhood and risky drinking in 41,482 male Marine Corps recruits age 18 to 20.

Results from the Recruit Assessment Program survey led officials to identify 6,128 recruits, or 15 percent, as risky drinkers, 18,693, or 45 percent, as non-risky drinkers and 16,661, or 40 percent, as non-drinkers.

Among drinkers, those who started at age 13 or younger were 5.5 times as likely to be labeled risky drinkers. Risky drinkers were more likely than non-risky drinkers or non-drinkers to smoke tobacco, be from a rural or small hometown, have experienced childhood sexual or emotional abuse, or to come from a household with a member who had a drinking problem or mental illness.

"Our findings underscore the need for programs and policies to reduce underage drinking, such as the minimum legal drinking age of 21 years," they authors of the study report conclude. "... After early age at first alcohol use, the factor most strongly associated with risky drinking was tobacco use. Whether reducing smoking will reduce risky drinking among youth is an important but unexplored question."

HIV SCREENING

Voluntary screening for HIV should be a routine part of the medical care of all adults, not just those at high risk, says a study by researchers at the Yale School of Medicine.

The research team reported its findings in the Dec. 5 *Annals of Internal Medicine* that routine HIV screening is cost-effective, even in communities where as few as two in 1,000 people have undiagnosed HIV infection.

The study reinforces the wisdom of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines

issued in September that recommend routine HIV screening for everyone between 13 and 64 in all health care settings.

The guidelines were based in part on findings of the study team led by A. David Paltiel, professor in the Department of Epidemiology and Public Health at the Yale School of Medicine, and the Yale School of Management.

Paltiel and colleagues developed a mathematical model to simulate the events that occur in an HIV-infected person, including detection, treatment, medical expenses, transmitting the disease to others, and death. The model calculated the additional costs due to screening and the additional survival attributable to earlier detection.

"HIV screening delivers better value than many other diagnostic tests and treatments that physicians use routinely in daily practice, including screening for breast cancer, colorectal cancer, diabetes and hypertension," said Paltiel, who cites the roughly 300,000 Americans who do not know they are infected with HIV as the reason to make HIV screening as routine as measuring cholesterol.

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