

ALCOHOL ABUSE LIFETIME PREVALENCE RATES AND THE UTILITY OF PREVENTION

Early Onset of Drinking and Lifetime Alcohol Abuse and Dependence

Bridget F. Grant, PhD

Chief of Biometry

Division of Biometry and Epidemiology

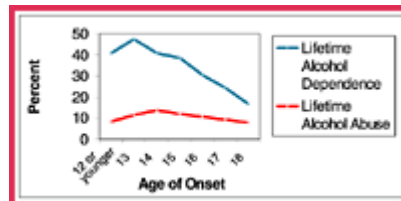
National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism

Bethesda, Maryland

Much attention has been given to delaying the onset of drinking as a prevention strategy. Drinking has been associated with a number of serious health problems including dependence. Other associated problems include tobacco and other drug use, infrequent condom use, early and unwanted pregnancy, exposure to sexually transmitted diseases, violence, depression, and suicide.

In 1992, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism conducted the largest national survey on alcohol use ever performed in the U.S. or elsewhere. Data from this survey have extended our knowledge of the relation between age at onset of alcohol use and prevalence of alcohol abuse and dependence in late adolescence and adulthood. This study was the first to examine effects of early onset of drinking in a large, representative sample of the U.S. population.

The figure below shows the prevalence of lifetime alcohol dependence and abuse among individuals who reported onset of alcohol use from age 12 or less to age 18.



Lifetime alcohol dependence (blue line) decreased steeply as a function of increasing age at onset of drinking. In the total sample, more than 40 percent of respondents who initiated drinking before age 13 were classified with alcohol dependence at some time in their lives. By contrast, rates of alcohol dependence among those who started drinking at ages 17 and 18 were 24.5 percent and 16.6 percent, respectively.

The results for lifetime alcohol abuse (red line) were similar to those for dependence, although the decrease with age was less dramatic.

These results suggest that preventive efforts should be targeted toward the delay of alcohol use onset. The weakness of such a preventive strategy is the lack of complete understanding as to why onset of alcohol use is related to the development of alcohol abuse and dependence.

- Age at first use of alcohol is a powerful predictor of lifetime alcohol abuse and dependence.
- Age at first use is associated with a variety of other health problems including early and unwanted pregnancy, depression, and suicide.
- More than 40 percent of individuals who begin drinking before age 13 are classified with alcohol dependence at some time in their lives. Lifetime alcohol dependence decreases steeply as age at onset of drinking increases.

Grant BF, Dawson DA. 1997. Age at onset of alcohol use and its association with DSM-IV alcohol abuse and dependence: Results from the National Longitudinal Alcohol Epidemiologic Survey. *J Subst Abuse* 9: 103-110.