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Drinking study shows power of peer pressure

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Give college students a clue on how much their friends are really drinking, and those students will tend to drink less alcohol, according to a recent paper.

Scientists agree that scare tactics that highlight the harms of heavy drinking don't reduce alcohol consumption among youth.

Almost 30 years ago, health officials began using a novel method to combat alcohol abuse on campuses by informing instead of scaring. Students were made aware of how their drinking compares with others on campus in various ways.

A study that reviews research on different communication strategies found that individual feedback either via a computer or in person effectively reduced drinking among students.

Group counseling and mailed feedback did not have a significant impact on student drinking, and the jury is still out on media campaigns.

The study was published recently in the third issue of the Cochrane Library 2009.

The majority of young people overestimate how much and how often their peers drink. And that can foster an environment that encourages heavy drinking.

"This creates a type of peer pressure, which drives levels of drinking upwards," said David Foxcroft, professor of health care practice at Oxford Brookes University and the review's co-author.

Foxcroft and his fellow researchers in the United Kingdom analyzed data from 22 previously published studies that included 7,275 mostly U.S. college students.

All the studies had the same goal — to reduce drinking by educating students on how their drinking behavior compared with others on campus. The review sought to determine which methods are effective and which are not.

Students who received personal feedback either through the Internet or individual face-to-face sessions reduced their overall alcohol consumption compared with those who did not get personal feedback. The review also found evidence that Web-based feedback reduced binge drinking — defined as five or more drinks in one sitting for a man and four or more for a woman — and alcohol-related problems.

The researchers did not find group counseling and mailed feedback to be effective methods to reduce drinking.

The review tried to determine the effectiveness of media campaigns to correct student misperception, but because of rigorous inclusion constraints, only two studies by the same researcher, William DeJong, a professor at Boston University's School of Public Health, were included in the review. One of the two showed success in reducing student drinking, and the other did not.

"Re-analyzing data from both studies shows that the mixed results are due to differences in the number of campus communities with alcohol outlet density," DeJong said. "Powerful social marketing media campaigns are needed to work where there is easy access to alcohol, but they do work."

Many studies that focus on the effect of social media campaigns on a single campus were excluded from the review.

"It is very difficult to do randomized assignment of subjects in social norms marketing campaigns within a campus community," said Wes Perkins, professor of sociology at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, N.Y.

ALCOHOL DEATHS

Alcohol abuse at U.S. college campuses is a daunting problem. A study published in July's Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs estimates 1,825 college students ages 18 to 24 die annually because of alcohol-related unintentional injuries.

“Every college student has roughly two age-mates not in college, which means that over 5,000 18- to 24-year-old Americans die each year due to alcohol-related causes,” said Ralph Hingson, director of the Division of Epidemiology and Prevention Research at the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism and one of the report’s co-authors. “That is more than the number of U.S. soldiers that have died during the entire Iraq war.”

The report found an increase in unintentional deaths and injuries related to alcohol consumption from previous years as well as an increase in drunken driving among college students.

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