

Drinking Over the Life Span: Issues of Biology, Behavior, and Risk

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| <i>Measuring the Health Risks and Benefits of Alcohol</i> | 3 |
| <i>Alcohol Involvement Over the Life Course</i> | 28 |
| <i>Alcohol and Violence</i> | 54 |

Forty-four percent of the adult U.S. population (aged 18 and over) are current drinkers who have consumed at least 12 drinks in the preceding year (Dawson et al. 1995). While most people who drink do so safely, the minority who consume alcohol heavily produce an impact that ripples outward to encompass their families, friends, and communities. The following statistics give a glimpse of the magnitude of problem drinking:

- *Approximately 14 million Americans—7.4 percent of the population—meet the diagnostic criteria for alcohol abuse or alcoholism (Grant et al. 1994).*
- *More than one-half of American adults have a close family member who has or has had alcoholism (Dawson and Grant 1998).*
- *Approximately one in four children younger than 18 years old in the United States is exposed to alcohol abuse or alcohol dependence in the family (Grant 2000).*
- *Of 11.1 million victims of violent crime each year, almost one in four, or 2.7 million, report that the offender had been drinking alcohol prior to committing the crime (Greenfeld 1998).*
- *Traffic crashes involving alcohol killed more than 16,000 people in 1997 alone (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration 1998).*
- *The estimated economic cost of alcohol abuse was \$184.6 billion for 1998 alone, or roughly \$638 for every man, woman, and child living in the United States that year (Harwood et al. 2000).*

Alcohol consumption has consequences for the health and well-being of those who drink and, by extension, the lives of those around them. The first section in this chapter, “Measuring the Health Risks and Benefits of Alcohol,” surveys the health effects of alcohol, including the relationship between alcohol and cardiovascular risk. In addition, the section addresses some of the new approaches with which scientists are attempting to draw a more informative picture of how alcohol affects health. Investigators are, for example, analyzing alcohol-related mortality in terms of number of years lost as well as number of lives, measuring disability as well as illness and mortality, and looking at populations as well as individuals.

Beginning in early childhood and continuing throughout life, many factors interact to affect a person’s risk of developing alcohol-related problems. The second section in this chapter, “Alcohol Involvement Over the Life Course,” describes research on the dynamic

interplay of social, psychological, and biological influences on the development of drinking behavior across the life span. Recent studies indicate, for example, that certain childhood traits are predictive of adult alcohol disorder. This research suggests that the process by which early risk leads to a clinical disorder involves biologically based vulnerability, psychosocial factors that support the vulnerability, and an environment that makes alcohol available for use. Developmental researchers seek to understand the causes of alcohol problems by examining interactions of multiple factors that emerge and change or remain stable over time and by identifying common underlying factors that place some subgroups at higher risk than others.

Studies show that alcohol is far more likely than other drugs to be involved in substance-related violence. As noted in the third section in this chapter, "Alcohol and Violence," in 25 percent of all incidents the offender used alcohol alone (20 percent) or in combination with other drugs (5 percent), whereas in only 5 percent of incidents did the offender use only drugs other than alcohol (Greenfeld 1998). Research has been advancing beyond confirmation of basic relationships between alcohol and violence toward an examination of the role of personality and situational factors that interact with both alcohol use and violence. Areas of research focus include youthful perpetrators, alcohol use by victims of violence, alcohol availability, and environments in which violence occurs. In addition, current research seeks to determine whether alcohol use is not merely associated with, but instead is perhaps a cause of, violence.

The research reviewed in this chapter represents a wide spectrum of approaches to understanding the causes and consequences of alcohol use and abuse. These research findings can help shape the efforts of communities to reduce the negative consequences of alcohol consumption, assist health practitioners in advising consumers, and help individuals make informed decisions about drinking.

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