



THE PROBLEM

Alcohol use in adolescents

The following information is provided by the American Athletic Institute as part of the Life of an Athlete series through the western Nebraska program sponsor, Panhandle Prevention Coalition. The data presented in this document references a New York study. For the most current local underage drinking statistics, go panhandlepreventioncoalition.com.

In Brief

Alcohol use among adolescent athletes is fairly high, but the problem is complex. Young athletes may be more likely to abuse alcohol than their non-athlete peers and more likely to suffer behavioral and psychosocial consequences as a result of drinking. They are also more prone to binge drinking. Education and prevention strategies should focus on physiological, behavioral and psychosocial consequences. At this juncture, these problems must be confronted in an immediate fashion. They must in all instances be well documented, including first time episodes.

The problem of alcohol use among competitive athletes is complex, partly because of their high visibility. For years the media have regularly reported incidents involving high level athletes and their use of alcohol. Although some athletes have demonstrated that treatment and rehabilitation can be successful, too often alcohol use among athletes ends in tragedy.

Unfortunately, the consequences of alcohol use also extend to younger, less visible athletes, particularly to high school athletes who abuse alcohol through chronic overuse or heavy episodic drinking (HED) (five or more drinks at one sitting for men and women). Many high school coaches have had an unfortunate amount of experience with team cohesion and athletic relationships divided by alcohol use, resulting in less-than-optimal performance due to decreased interest and diminished team commitment. Others have had to deal with tragedies such as automobile accidents and other alcohol-related injuries and deaths.

In a survey of 215 high school athletic directors, 59% reported having personally encountered intoxicated student-athletes. They considered alcohol use to be a bigger problem among their players than the use of other drugs.

A review of alcohol use among high school and college athletes, as well as the clinical, physiological, psychosocial, and behavioral effects in these groups, can provide help in assessing the efficacy of education and prevention efforts and provide to team physicians, coaches, and athletic directors practical strategies for dealing with individual athletes.

Prevalence and Patterns of Use

In New York State the use of alcohol by student athletes has been well recorded by the American Athletic

Associated Risk-Taking Behavior

The “just do it” generation has been marketed to and it has indeed worked. Today’s athlete has assumed the adventurer/risk takers stance on how far to push their luck. Athletes have always portrayed the assumption of risk as behavior as usual. The recent onset of increases in pack mentality has certainly increased the problems and behaviors of concern we presently see. Even non risk takers boldly portray themselves as risk takers to fulfill a “wan-a-bee” identity.

Behavioral and Psychosocial Consequences

The ripple effect of use spills over into all aspects of a young athlete’s life including social, personal, psychological, education al and legal.

Alcohol and Athletes at a Glance

Patterns and Prevention: Below is a recap of points made on the nature and magnitude of alcohol use among high school and college athletes and how best to approach the problem.

- An increasing number of high school and college athletes either binge drink or abstain, with fewer students reporting moderate intake. Female and male athletes drink at the same rates. HED rates are nearly the same.
- Athletes drink alcohol as frequently and as intensely as non-athletes, with the difference between male athletes and non-athletes greater than that between female athletes and non-athletes. Athletes in contact sports report greater alcohol use. Athletes in team sports report greater use than individual sports.
- Drinking usually starts by high school, often in junior high.
- Drinking rates only continue in one direction up and up and up.
- The physiological effects of alcohol are mostly related to intermittent use with regard to lost training effect and diminished athletic performance. Additional harm from alcohol use by athletes is behavioral, legal, academic, and social, all of which can lead to sports eligibility and participation problems. Therefore, education and prevention efforts should focus not only on the physiological negative impact but as well as academic, behavioral, legal, social, and sports-participation consequences of alcohol use.
- Athletes who drink do not necessarily experience more legal or behavioral consequences than other students who drink, but athletes are often more visible, and their problems often lead to highly publicized consequences.
- Educational and preventive interventions should be initiated and led by student-athletes and be sport specific. Athletic directors and coaches should provide the proper environment, enforcement, and sanctions. Random or mandatory testing is probably not helpful but deserves further study.
- Multiple educational approaches to address alcohol may be necessary for various athletes because no preferred approach exists.

Alcohol remains the most used and abused drug in America. Unfortunately, many of the users and abusers are high school students. According to AAI Surveys, 80+% of NY high school students, grades 9-12, indicate they have had at least one drink of alcohol during their lifetime. Results from the same survey indicate 52% reported having at least one drink in the last thirty days and 37% consumed five or more drinks in a row during the last thirty days.

Many national studies have reported that high school student-athletes drink alcohol at about the same rate as other high school students and some studies report slightly higher use by student-athletes. The latest AAI

be our initial rationale for non-use. The following are some of the additional benefits for student-athletes who choose not to drink alcohol:

- Academic or athletic performance will not be hampered;
- The risk of breaking school rules or the law is greatly reduced;
- Serious and life threatening problems related to being alcohol impaired such as drunk driving and sexual decision- making, injury, arrest, death are eliminated or reduced;
- There is no risk of becoming addicted to alcohol; and,
- The ability to develop appropriate life skills such as stress management, problem solving, conflict resolution, interacting with others, and goal setting is enhanced.

Most young people would only be influenced by the first two benefits, as they are more tangible and more immediate. The latter three fall into the category of “not me.”

Alcohol and Sport a Serious Affair

Billions of dollars are spent annually on alcohol marketing. Student-athletes receive many messages promoting their use of alcohol. Many of these messages are subtle hints that alcohol use will improve athletic ability, increase their chances of being successful in life, and make them more sexually attractive. It is impossible to stop this kind of advertising or to protect youth from it. It is possible for adults to counteract the promotion of alcohol by setting positive examples, using teachable moments, consistently enforcing rules, and learning how to respond when concerned about a student-athletes' behavior. All these efforts will greatly assist student-athletes in making difficult choices about the nonuse of alcohol.