

# NOVA Notes

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## Early Drinking = Significant Risks

### Early Adolescent Drinking

*A recent study collected data from 43,000 adults in the United States. The results again demonstrate that the younger an adolescent is when they start drinking, the more significant problems they are likely to have with alcoholism.*

This association between early alcohol use and later problems with alcoholism held up even when the study investigators controlled for other risk factors. These results are significant and echo the results found in previous studies.

Of those individuals who began drinking alcohol before the age of 14, 47% experienced alcoholism at some point in life. This compares to only 9% of those who began drinking at 21 or older. Moreover, for each year earlier than age 21 an individual began to drink, the greater the likelihood they would develop alcoholism in their lifetime. Approximately 25% of those in the survey indicated drinking at age 16 or younger, while 46% or nearly half of those drinkers who developed alcoholism began drinking by age 16.

Among the new findings of the study was that among all drinkers, early alcohol use was not

only associated with a higher risk of developing alcoholism, but that the alcoholism usually developed within 10 years of the initial drinking, before age 25, and within any year of adult life. For those who began drinking early it was clear that they had more frequent episodes of active alcoholism, for longer periods of time, and with much greater severity of symptoms.

A recent youth survey indicated that 26% of high school students began drinking alcohol prior to age 13 (Youth Risk Behavior Survey of the Centers for Disease Control).

[Source: NIH News, July 2006. For more information go to: [www.nih.gov/news](http://www.nih.gov/news) or contact Greg McBride, MEd, LCADC, LPC at 609-275-8855]

### Youthful Deaths Related to Substance Abuse

*It's another Spring and tragedy has struck the Central New Jersey area once again. A painful reminder of the consequences of adolescent substance abuse. The first death was related to early use and abuse of alcohol and the second to the abuse of inhalants. Their families are devastated, their friends ineffective in preventing these events. Has our tolerance of drinking and drug use as a "right of passage" left our kids with the wrong message? What responsibility does a fraternity have to protect its pledges? Does having high tolerance for alcohol*

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*consumption mean you're the kind of "guy" a fraternity wants as a "frat brother?"*

This year it was a fraternity pledge event (commonly known as a "hazing") at Rider University in Lawrenceville that produced the death of Gary DeVercelly, an 18 year old freshman at the school. Gary first went into a coma and later died of acute alcohol poisoning at the hospital. It has been suggested that he drank nearly three-quarters of a bottle of vodka and ended up with a blood alcohol level (BAL) of 0.426% at autopsy. By comparison the BAL limit for driving is 0.08% in NJ. What adds to the sadness of this event is that similar events have happened at area colleges for years. Last year it was another intoxicated freshman who died at The College of New Jersey and some years back while pledging for membership in the exclusive eating clubs of Princeton University students were rushed to the hospital in acute alcohol poisoning. Universities have been lax in their concern about underage drinking for far too long. They either under staff their prevention and counseling dept. or they cut them when budgets get tight. Worse yet, some simply staff for appearances and not necessarily for effect.

It's not just here in NJ but it is problematic across the US. Freshman year in college is one of the most complex and dynamic periods in an adolescent's development. We need to do better in preparing kids for this moment in time. We need to protect them from what they will confront in that first year of college. Some of their choices could be permanent.

The second death was from inhaling "dust off spray." Matthew Molnar, 20 years old was found dead in the woods not far from his family's home. He had been to treatment in the past and was obviously in a relapse. He was discovered by his father. Most people rarely think of inhalants when they discuss drug abuse, let alone that they could be deadly. We know that adolescence is a time of experimentation, but what are we telling our kids? What message is

being sent to them not just in the media, but in our family life? What do we want our future to look like? Finally, how available is ongoing treatment, and why is it so difficult to find kids the treatment they need? I'm afraid we have more questions than answers.

[Source: The Times (of Trenton), articles from 3/28/07 to 5/7/07]

## VA Tech Shootings a Wake Up Call on Mental Health Treatment?

*If you have been thinking about the tragedy that took place last month on the Virginia Tech campus, I'm pretty sure you're not alone. While everyone is seeking answers to something that is difficult to understand, is anyone looking at the obvious? For the past 20 years we have been dismantling our mental health systems, eliminating safe haven for the ill and the ability to protect the public. Are we desensitized to these events? We need more advocacy for those with psychiatric and/or addictive illness so that proper systems of treatment can be in place.*

I am not trying to say that everything can be explained away with wherever you decide to point the finger. That's not my point. I just believe that we have a societal responsibility that we haven't been meeting. That is to treat the infirm. It does take money. Our collective money (usually raised through taxes). It also takes our will to tackle the task. What crisis will convince us of the value of such an investment?

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