

Underage Drinking in Autistic and Non-Autistic Youth

Summary Reports describe results from newly published research using data from SPARK participants.

■ Study title

Alcohol Use Patterns Among Underage Autistic and Non-Autistic Youth

■ What was the study about?

Autistic youth are more likely to have some risk factors that are linked to alcohol and drug abuse in the general population. Those factors include experiencing mental health conditions, stigma, and social exclusion. Researchers compared the reasons that autistic and non-autistic youth gave for underage drinking, and their drinking patterns.

■ How was the research done?

Researchers enrolled 94 autistic and 92 non-autistic youth ages 16 to 20. The autistic participants included members of the SPARK study who answered questions on their own. Researchers designed the study so that half of the youth in each group were people who said they drank in the previous year. As a result, the study did not determine overall drinking rates. The youth took surveys online or by phone. Parents agreed to allow their child under age 18 to take part.

UNDERAGE DRINKING BY AUTISTIC AND NON-AUTISTIC YOUTH ¹



■ What did the researchers learn?

- Almost one-third of autistic youth, and two-thirds of non-autistic youth, had at least one drink in the previous month.
- Seven percent of the autistic group, and 24 percent of the non-autistic group, reported binge drinking in the past month.
- About 9 percent of the autistic youth had hazardous drinking, compared with 27 percent of the non-autistic youth, according to a screening survey they completed. Drinking is considered hazardous when it can hurt someone's health and safety.
- Compared with other youth, autistic youth were less likely to drink for social reasons, to have a good time, and to fit in. But they were just as likely as their non-autistic peers to drink to help them cope.
- Autistic youth who reported hiding their autism traits more often were less likely to drink.

- Among autistic youth, those who drank two or more times in the past year were more likely to have had depression, to have been bullied, to spend less time hiding their autistic traits, and to have families with lower incomes.

■ What was new and innovative about the study?

This study appears to be the first to compare underage drinking patterns among autistic and non-autistic youth, and to explore each group's reasons for drinking.

■ What do the findings mean?

Autistic youth as a group drink for different reasons than non-autistic youth, and standard alcohol abuse prevention programs may not be as effective for them. "The differences in motivations for drinking suggest we need programs adapted to the needs of autistic young people," says researcher Laura Graham Holmes, Ph.D.

■ What are people saying?

STUDY PARTICIPANTS:

- "My son's autism is very mild. He is now a college freshman who began to experiment with alcohol right around the time of the study. It was good timing! It is a situation I had been thinking about and continue to be aware of. Obviously my worry is that the alcohol consumption becomes a crutch to help him become more social and it spirals into an addiction."
- "The researcher that contacted us was very professional and flexible with our schedule/preferred communication channel. She put my son at ease and it was a good experience for him. We support all research because it is essential for understanding. My son feels good about participating because he feels that he has something unique and important to offer that will further the greater good. He was nervous but proud of his contributions."

STUDY RESEARCHER:

- **Laura Graham Holmes, Ph.D., assistant professor, CUNY Hunter College Silberman School of Social Work:** "Autistic youth do sometimes drink. It's not necessarily to the same extent as non-autistic youth; they drink less and drink less frequently. But some autistic youth are still having problems with alcohol. They're either engaging in hazardous drinking or binge drinking. Or they screened positive on the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test, which suggests that they may be in the beginning stages of an alcohol use disorder. It's really important to address these problems as early as possible since they can be so devastating when left unaddressed."

■ What's next?

Graham Holmes is leading a team that is studying an online group intervention for autistic adults who want more control over their alcohol, drug, or nicotine use.

■ References

1. Holmes L.G. *et al. J. Autism Dev. Disord.* Epub ahead of print (2023) [PubMed](#)

About SPARK Research Match

This SPARK program matches participants with research studies that they may want to join. These studies have been evaluated for scientific merit and approved by a scientific committee at SPARK. The program is free to researchers and participants. SPARK does not endorse or conduct these studies. Participants choose if they want to take part in a particular study.

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