



**With Alcohol, Starting Young May Lead to Dependency**

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FRIDAY, Sept. 18 (HealthDay News) -- Teens who start drinking before age 15 could jump-start any genetic conditions they might have that predispose them to developing alcohol dependency, according to an Australian study.

From a biological perspective, taking that first drink at a young age "may induce changes in the highly sensitive adolescent brain, which may also modify an individual's subsequent genetic vulnerability to [alcohol dependence]," Arpana Agrawal, an assistant professor of psychiatry at Washington University School of Medicine and an author of the study, said in a university news release.

The findings, published online Sept. 18 and in the December print issue of *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research*, are based on a study of 6,257 adult twins.

The younger people were when they had their first drink, especially if that occurred before age 15, the more symptoms of alcohol

dependency they developed, the study found. Early drinkers also tended to have an increased genetic vulnerability for alcohol.

Those who had their first drink later in life showed far fewer signs of alcohol dependency, despite the genetic predisposition, Agrawal noted.

This suggests that alcohol dependency among those who started drinking later, "while less common, are attributable to unique experiences of those individuals -- for example, a traumatic life event," she said.

Carol A. Prescott, a professor of psychology at the University of Southern California, said the findings had two possible conclusions. "Early drinking changes the course an individual is on, and is thus a direct cause of increased [alcohol dependency] risk, and early drinking is correlated with [alcohol dependency] risk and is thus an indirect indicator of ... risk," she said in the news release.

Agrawal said the findings should be used to discourage young people from experimenting with drinking early because such behavior might trigger an onset of alcohol abuse.

The researchers plan to do a similar study that looks at older and younger groups in Australia and the United States to try to duplicate their findings.

**More information**

The U.S. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism has suggestions on [talking to kids about alcohol](#).

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