

New study evaluates link between young women's beliefs on alcohol use and sex

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It may come as little surprise that alcohol use is widespread among young adults. In the U.S., 70 percent of adults aged 18 to 24 drink alcohol, with 40 percent of women imbibing over the recommended daily limit of 3 drinks per day. Add that to preconceived notions that alcohol-related behavior results in sexual risk-taking, and it may point to why young women are experiencing an increased prevalence of sexually-transmitted infections.

New research from the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine shows that just over two-thirds (66.9 percent) of college-aged women engaged in unprotected sex during their last sexual encounter involving alcohol.

The study, published online in the *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, set out to understand how one's beliefs about alcohol and sex affect condom use during [sexual encounters](#) involving alcohol. Based on participants surveyed, sex without a condom was significantly and positively related to both one's motivation for [sexual activity](#) to satisfy personal physical needs and stronger beliefs that alcohol promotes sexual risk-taking.

"Understanding the factors that may underlie the association between alcohol and condomless sex among young women is of considerable public health importance," says Jennifer Brown, PhD, lead author and associate professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Neuroscience at the UC College of Medicine. "Particularly because incident HIV infections and other [sexually transmitted infections](#) are on

the rise among women, and the majority of these are transmitted via heterosexual contact."

Among the characteristics of reported sexual encounters, most women in the study consumed more than 3 to 5 drinks and described themselves and their partner as being "moderately intoxicated."

"Most young women reported levels of heavy drinking prior to sex, which can impair their cognitive functioning and decision-making. These findings underscore the need to examine the associations between alcohol consumption and sexual risk-taking," says Brown, whose research in the Addiction Sciences Division focuses on substance use and sexual health. Brown adds, "Within this context, beliefs that drinking could result in sexual risk-taking may account for why motives for sex to satisfy personal physical needs relate to decreased condom use."

Study participants consisted of 287 college-age females, primarily Caucasian, who anonymously self-reported on their most recent sexual activity involving alcohol. Participants were surveyed to examine their associations between alcohol use and sexual behavior and to self-report events of sexual encounters after drinking alcohol within the last 30 days.

"Relative to older women, young women engage in an elevated rate of alcohol use and are at increased risk for adverse sexual health outcomes. Interventions that target beliefs around [alcohol](#) use, which could assist young women to increase condom usage, could show benefit in the reduction of HIV and other sexually-transmitted infections, as well as unintended pregnancies," says Brown.

More information: Jennifer L. Brown et al, Young women's alcohol expectancies for sexual risk-taking mediate the link between sexual

enhancement motives and condomless sex when drinking, *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* (2016). [DOI: 10.1007/s10865-016-9760-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10865-016-9760-8)

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