

All adolescents should be screened for alcohol use, US pediatricians say

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Alcohol in Adolescents: Is there a role for religiosity?

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To The Editor

Alcohol abuse is a major public health issue, costing the UK economy up to £25 billion pounds per year. Young people tend to have a different alcohol-related risk profile compared to older alcohol users, with adolescents more likely to experience alcohol-related injuries and violence. In 2013, more than 5 million people between 12–20 years of age reported binge drinking. People who begin drinking before 15 years of age are five times more likely to develop alcohol abuse later in life than those who never started at such an age.¹ Internationally, university students drink more than their non-student peers. A high prevalence of “hazardous drinking” has been reported in this population with significant negative alcohol-related sequel, for individuals and those around them.²

A survey of over 1000 young people from Leicestershire (UK) showed significant differences between ethnic groups (Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims) with regard to their attitudes to alcohol consumption. Muslims exhibited particular sensitivity to their religion's prohibition of drinking alcohol. The three groups tended to have a similar frequency of alcohol consumption which was markedly lower than that reported by the White 15-16-year-olds.³ A large study involving 1837 Lebanese university students (Christians, Druze and Muslims), revealed that religiosity was related inversely to alcohol-related problems, even among drinkers.⁴ A more recent study of substance abuse in adolescents from Lebanon versus the U.S.A showed that Muslim adolescents had significantly less rates of alcohol and substance use than Christians in both Lebanon and Los Angeles. Attachment to God and family were shown to be negatively associated with substance abuse.⁵

Data from The National Comorbidity Survey Replication Study (ages 18–29, N = 900) revealed that childhood religiosity was protective against early alcohol use and progression to later abuse or dependence. Religiosity may be particularly protective during the transition period from adolescence to emerging adulthood.⁶ An interesting review by Rew and Wong, investigating the impact of religiosity on health attitudes and behaviors among this age group found that religiosity had a positive impact on health behaviors and alcohol use in 84% of the studies reviewed.⁷

Fourteen centuries ago, Islam successfully reduced alcohol consumption, in a society in which it was deeply entrenched and entwined with their daily lifestyle, social occasions, rituals and rites. A gradual approach together with nurturing of moral values in Muslim individuals and societies were the reasons for this success. The majority of Muslims all over the world have abided by the prohibition, and accordingly they are among the least affected by alcoholism problems.⁸ It is noteworthy that Avicenna and AlRhazi, in their books over a thousand years ago, made strong warnings to teenagers against alcohol.

Although it is difficult to know how much alcohol is consumed in each country, because of alcohol smuggling or local production at home, the World Health Organization's annual reports place Muslim countries at the bottom of the list in per capita alcohol consumption. Of 189 countries studied by WHO, the six with zero reported alcohol consumption are all Muslim, and 25 of the 30 countries which are lowest in reported alcohol consumption are Muslim.^{9, 10}

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