

HIGH-INTENSITY DRINKING

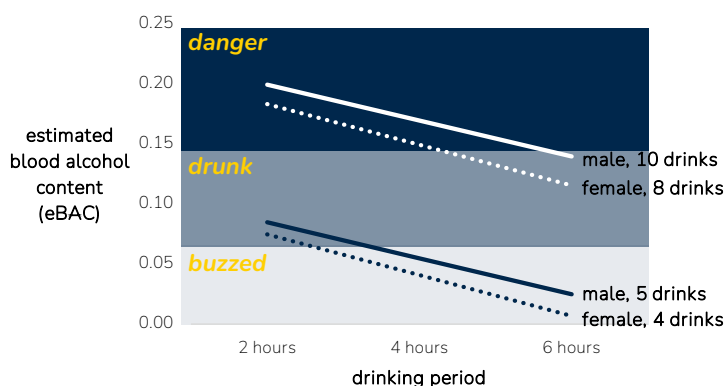
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WHAT IS HIGH-INTENSITY DRINKING?

Since the early 1990s, risky drinking has often been defined as *binge drinking*, or drinking at least 4 drinks in a row for women, or 5 drinks in a row for men. However, this **binge threshold may not clearly distinguish drinking risk**. A person who consumes five drinks over a few hours may or may not show signs of intoxication, depending on factors including body composition, food and water intake, and tolerance. A person who consumes ten drinks over the same time period is at high risk for alcohol poisoning and other negative outcomes. Therefore, researchers have recently begun examining the prevalence, correlates, and

consequences of *high-intensity drinking*, defined as **10 or more drinks (or 8+ drinks for women, 10+ for men)**.



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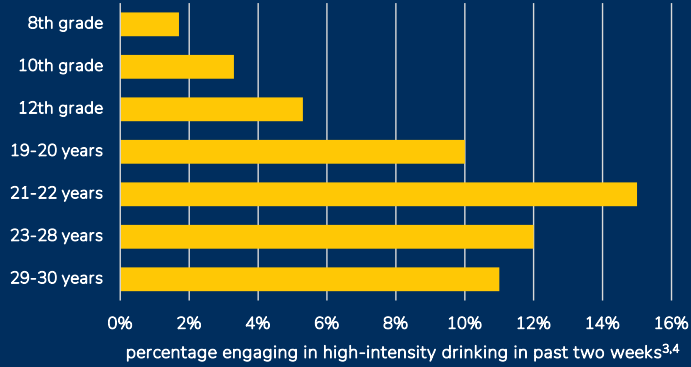
WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL CONSEQUENCES OF HIGH-INTENSITY DRINKING?

The more alcohol a person drinks, the more likely they are to experience negative consequences such as hangovers, injuries, and regretted sexual



encounters. **On days when a young adult engages in high-intensity drinking, they tend to experience a higher number of negative consequences than on days when they drink less.**¹ Importantly, they are likely to experience more negative consequences on days when they drink at high-intensity levels than on days when they drink at binge levels that don't reach the high-intensity threshold. **Young adults who engage in high-intensity drinking are also at increased risk for having symptoms of alcohol use disorder in their mid-30's.**²

HOW COMMON IS HIGH-INTENSITY DRINKING?



WHAT MOTIVATES HIGH-INTENSITY DRINKERS?

People drink alcohol for a variety of reasons, and these motives⁵ may vary each day.¹ For young adults, high-intensity drinking is more likely when they report drinking for enhancement motives, such as liking the feeling, or social motives, like to have more fun at a party.



WHO IS AT RISK FOR HIGH-INTENSITY DRINKING?

- **Gender:** Men are more likely than women to engage in high-intensity drinking.⁵
- **Age:** High-intensity drinking tends to peak around age 21-22 for men and 25-26 for women.³
- **Race/ethnicity:** Among adolescents, engaging in high-intensity drinking is most likely for White individuals and Native Peoples, and least likely for Asian American and African American individuals.⁶
- **College attendance:** Young adults attending 4-year colleges are more likely to engage in high-intensity drinking than their 2-year college and non-student peers.⁵
- **Greek affiliation:** Members of fraternities and sororities are more likely than their non-Greek peers to engage in high-intensity drinking.⁷
- **Expectations:** College students who think potential consequences of drinking are more likely (both positive consequences like being more social and negative consequences like vomiting) are also more likely to engage in high-intensity drinking.⁷
- **Family history:** Young people are at increased risk for high-intensity drinking if a biological parent or sibling has a history of drinking problems.⁵
- **Mental health:** Individuals experiencing symptoms of depression are at increased risk of high-intensity drinking.⁵
- **Other substance use:** Individuals who smoke cigarettes or use illicit drugs are more likely to engage in high-intensity drinking.⁵
- **Age of initiation:** Young adults are more likely to engage in high-intensity drinking if they started using alcohol before or during high school, rather than after high school.⁸
- **Drinking progression:** High school students who move from their first drink to their first time being drunk within the same school year are more likely to engage in high-intensity drinking than their peers with a slower progression.⁹
- **Family structure:** High-intensity drinking is less common among individuals who are married or who have children.^{8,10}

WHEN AND WHERE DOES HIGH-INTENSITY DRINKING HAPPEN?

Weekly rhythms: High-intensity drinking is more likely to happen on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays (i.e., weekends) than on other days of the week.^{1,7}

Bars and parties: When college students drink at bars or parties, they are more likely to engage in high-intensity drinking than if they are at home.⁷



WHAT DO WE STILL NEED TO LEARN?

- Risk factors do not exist in isolation. It will be important to learn more about **how combinations of risk factors, such as age and family risk, interact** to influence patterns of high-intensity drinking.
- A large proportion of research on high-intensity drinking focuses on college students. Although this population is at heightened risk, it is also important to learn about **high-intensity drinking outside of college contexts** and to study **differences between types of college environments**.
- Researchers have begun to explore some situational predictors of high-intensity drinking, like day of the week, drinking location, motives for drinking, and expectations of consequences. However, **many potential predictors, like stress and emotions, still need to be studied**.
- Previous research has shown that young adults who engage in high-intensity drinking are more likely to experience negative consequences



in the short-term. However, research is still needed to examine **consequences in mid-life and beyond**, as well as **potential multi-generational consequences for children of high-intensity drinkers**.

- There are several proven strategies to prevent and reduce alcohol consumption. However, we don't yet know **whether these strategies are effective at addressing high-intensity drinking**. It is also **possible that new interventions will need to be developed and tested** to specifically address high-intensity drinking.

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ADDITIONAL COMMENTARY

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SUGGESTED CITATION

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