

## RESEARCH BRIEF

---

### College Students Rarely Seek Help Despite Serious Substance Use Problems

Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment, July 2009

---

**Of Interest To:** College administrators/health professionals; parents; counselors treating substance use disorders in young adults.

**Major Findings:** College students frequently suffer from substance use disorders (SUD). It is rare that college students with SUD recognize they need help or actually seek help. Pressure from parents, friends or others is associated with help-seeking although rates of help-seeking escalate significantly when self-recognition occurs. College students who do seek help most likely look to educational programs first, followed by professional resources and twelve-step programs.

**Practice and Policy Suggestions:** College officials concerned about rampant substance use on campus should consider expanding early intervention opportunities by increasing educational programs promoting self-recognition of problem drinking or drug-taking, or recognition by friends and peers. Expansion of campus treatment and referral capacity, including brief interventions and on-line, confidential resources, should be considered. Parents may want to avail themselves of educational and other early intervention programs.

---

**Authors:** Caldeira KM,<sup>1</sup> Kasperski SJ,<sup>1</sup> Sharma E,<sup>2</sup> Vincent KB,<sup>1</sup> O'Grady KE,<sup>3</sup> Wish ED,<sup>1</sup> Arria AM.<sup>1,4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Center for Substance Abuse Research (CESAR), University of Maryland, College Park, MD

<sup>2</sup> Center for Health Behavior Research, University of Maryland, College Park, MD

<sup>3</sup> Department of Psychology, University of Maryland, College Park, MD

<sup>4</sup> Treatment Research Institute, Philadelphia, PA

**Findings:** Annual prevalence of substance use disorders (SUD) and aspects of the help-seeking process among a sample of 946 students at one large public university were assessed in personal interviews during the first three years of college. Help-seeking was rare among the 548 SUD cases identified (8.8%), but was significantly higher among individuals who experienced social pressure from parents (32.5%), friends (34.2%) or another person (58.3%). Only 3.6% perceived a need for help, but help-seeking was considerably higher among those students (90.0%).

The findings stem from CESAR's College Life Study (CLS), a longitudinal study of college students' health behaviors that tracks 1,253 undergraduates at a large, public, university. The CLS has confirmed previous findings of widespread substance use problems on college campuses with large proportions of college students meeting criteria for SUD. Researchers ascertained that the annual prevalence of SUD increased from 23.6% of students in their first year to 35.0% in their third year, with nearly one-half of students (46.8%) meeting criteria for alcohol or marijuana SUD at least once during their first three years as undergraduates.

**Implications:** More and better early intervention opportunities are suggested for college and university officials concerned about problematic drinking and drug-taking on their campuses. These include educational programs to improve problem recognition and desire to change by SUD students and/or their friends and peers. A wider range of on-campus help options is also suggested, including treatment and use of brief interventions. Brief interventions have been exhaustively studied and found appropriate for college students when used by trained professionals. On-line helping tools are suggested for a population shown to be treatment-averse and secretive. For parents of college

students, the same educational efforts are suggested along with helping tools stressing the importance of maintaining the parent-child connection even into college.

**Limitations:** Help-seeking, social pressures, and perceived need were measured only once, therefore, the data could underestimate the true extent of these phenomena. All data were collected via self-report and not corroborated by friends, relatives or college administrators. The sample was confined to one college and may not be representative of other colleges/universities and findings may not be generalizable to other academic institutions. While there was no evidence of attrition bias, the authors acknowledge the possibility that help-seeking may have been underestimated due to a tendency of individuals with the most serious SUDs to decline participation in follow-up assessments. Finally, detailed information was not gathered on the type of help sought by students, the duration or status of completion.

---

*For more information about this study, visit [www.collegelifestudy.umd.edu](http://www.collegelifestudy.umd.edu) or contact Amelia Arria, Associate Director of the Center for Substance Abuse Research at the University of Maryland College Park, at [aarria@cesar.umd.edu](mailto:aarria@cesar.umd.edu). This brief is disseminated with the assistance of the Treatment Research Institute, a non-profit research and development group specializing in science-driven reform of policy and practice in addiction and substance use. Visit the TRI website at [www.tresearch.org](http://www.tresearch.org).*

**TRI** | science  
addiction