Early onset of drinking increases alcohol use in adulthood


Does the age of onset of drinking affect adult alcohol use?

**METHODS**

- **Design:** Longitudinal cohort study
- **Setting:** Twelve classes of second grade pupils in Jyväskylä, Finland from 1968–2001.
- **Population:** 369 children in the second grade of school at study enrolment.
- **Prognostic factors:** Age of onset of drinking (assessed by personal interview alone at ages 14 and 20, and by personal interview and Life Situation Questionnaire at ages 27, 36, and 42).
- **Outcomes:** Adult alcohol use (frequency of drinking; frequency of binge drinking (defined as more than five drinks; scale from 0 = never to 5 = several times a week).
- **Follow up period:** Thirty four years.

**MAIN RESULTS**

Mean age of onset of drinking was 15 years 6 months old (range 10–30 years). People who started drinking at age 13 or younger had significantly increased frequency of alcohol use and binge drinking in adulthood than those who started drinking at age 18 or later (p < 0.05 for all outcomes, see table).

**CONCLUSIONS**

Adult alcohol use increases in people who start drinking at an early age. Interventions that delay the onset of drinking are likely to prevent alcohol problems in later life.

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**Age of onset of drinking and drinking habits at age 36–42 years**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Onset age of drinking</th>
<th>Mean drinking frequency</th>
<th>Mean binge drinking score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 13 years old</td>
<td>193 days/year Men, 110 days/year Women</td>
<td>3.2 Men, 1.9 Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥ 18 years old</td>
<td>101.6 days/year Men, 47.6 days/year Women</td>
<td>1.8 Men, 0.7 Women</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p values shown to three decimal points only.*