

# College Athletes and Alcohol and Other Drug Use

Few would argue that athletic success depends on both physical and mental health. Given that, it would be reasonable to expect that college athletes avoid using alcohol and other drugs to preserve their overall health and enhance their athletic performance. In fact, college athletes use alcohol, spit tobacco, and steroids at higher rates than their non-athlete peers.<sup>1</sup> Cocaine attracted publicity for its role in the deaths of star athletes in the 1980s and has since waned as a prevalent drug among college athletes. Even so, cocaine still poses risks for college athletes, as do other drugs such as diet aids, ephedrine, marijuana, and psychedelics.



## Alcohol

A national study of varsity athletes found that almost 77 percent of athletes had used alcohol in the previous 12 months, a decrease from 81 percent in 2001.<sup>2</sup>

A national study of college student drinking found that athletes have significantly higher rates of heavy drinking (defined as five or more drinks in a row for men, four or more for women) than non-athletes. Among men not competing in intercollegiate athletics, 49 percent reported heavy drinking in the two weeks prior to the survey, compared with 57 percent of the male athletes. For women students, the difference in drinking patterns was just as disparate: 40 percent of non-athlete women reported heavy

drinking in the previous two weeks, compared with 48 percent of female athletes.<sup>3</sup>

Athletes tend to drink in seasonal cycles. A study at a large private university in 1990 found an approximate 50 percent increase in drinking when athletes were off-season. In season, 42 percent of men and 26 percent of women drank alcohol at least once a week, but during the remainder of the year weekly alcohol consumption jumped to 60 percent for men and 41 percent for women.<sup>4</sup>



## Spit Tobacco

Although spit tobacco is often marketed as “smokeless tobacco,” implying that it poses fewer health risks than cigarettes, chewing tobacco and snuff are highly addictive and can lead to oral cancer, mouth lesions, and gum disease.<sup>5</sup> Male athletes are particularly at risk, chiefly because of intensive marketing targeted to adolescent boys, distribution of free spit tobacco

to college players, promotions by professional athletes, and the convenience of using spit tobacco during games.<sup>5</sup>

A national study found spit tobacco to be widely used among male college athletes, especially baseball players. Fully 42 percent of baseball players and 30



## Male Athletes and Sexual Assault

Alcohol and other drug use are often linked to violence on college campuses. In a study of women who had been victims of some type of sexual aggression while in college, from intimidation and illegal restraint to rape, 68 percent reported that their male assailants had been drinking at the time of the attack.<sup>14</sup>

Several studies have found male athletes to be more likely than other men on campus to commit sexual assaults.<sup>15</sup>

- In a study of victims of sexual aggression at a large mid-western university, male athletes were greatly overrepresented among the assailants described by the women surveyed. Though men on sports teams were less than 2 percent of the total male population on campus, they made up 23 percent of the attackers in sexual assaults and 14 percent in attempted sexual assaults.<sup>14</sup>
  - At another university, an anonymous survey found that men on varsity, revenue-producing teams, such as football and basketball, self-reported higher rates of sexually abusive behavior.<sup>16</sup>
  - Gang rapes on campus are most often perpetrated by men who participate in intensive male peer groups that foster rape-supportive behaviors and attitudes. One review of 24 alleged gang rapes found that in 22 of the 24 documented cases, the perpetrators were members of intercollegiate athletic teams or fraternities.<sup>17</sup>
- Involvement in all-male peer groups may insulate some men from doubts about the inappropriateness of their behavior, particularly when their team or fraternity holds prestige on campus.<sup>18</sup> At some universities, campus programs have begun to include male varsity athletes as rape prevention educators so they can serve as positive role models for their peers.<sup>18</sup>

## For additional information

### The Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse and Violence Prevention

Education Development Center, Inc.  
55 Chapel Street  
Newton, Massachusetts 02458-1060  
www.higheredcenter.org  
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percent of football players had used spit tobacco in the previous 12 months.<sup>2</sup> These figures are a drop from nearly 60 percent of baseball players and 40 percent of football players in the early 1990s, yet they still dwarf the national use rate of 17 percent for college men.<sup>1,6</sup>

In most women's sports, spit tobacco use is rare, but in the same national study, nearly 20 percent of women ice hockey players reported using.<sup>2</sup>

A survey of varsity baseball players at 52 California colleges found clear racial and ethnic differences in spit tobacco use: 42 percent of white athletes, 37 percent of Asians, 36 percent of Hispanics, 35 percent of Native American and 11 percent of African Americans use spit tobacco.<sup>7</sup> Almost 98 percent of the athletes who use spit tobacco started by the age of 20.<sup>5</sup>



## Diet Pills, Laxatives, and Diuretics

Eating disorders and abuse of diet aids can increase the risk of electrolyte imbalance, muscle loss, bone loss, and injury. Abuse of appetite suppressants (most of which include a type of addictive stimulant), laxatives, and diuretics appears to be higher in certain sports such as gymnastics, dance, figure skating, and cross-country running.<sup>8</sup>

A study of female collegiate gymnasts found that 62 percent had used at least one extreme weight-loss method at least twice a week for three or more months, including 24 percent who had used diet pills, 12 percent who had used diuretics, 7 percent who had used laxatives, and 26 percent who had induced vomiting.<sup>9</sup> These rates are much higher than for female non-athletes. At a private college in the Northeast, a survey of female students found that 1 percent regularly used diet pills, less than 1 percent repeatedly used diuretics, a little over 1 percent consistently took laxatives, and 3 percent regularly induced vomiting.<sup>10</sup>

Eating disorders and abuse of diet aids are much more common among women athletes than men. Nearly 11 percent of female athletes use nonprescription diet drugs, such as Dexatrim and Acutrim, about four times the rate of use among male athletes.<sup>6</sup>

The use of one herbal diet and energy supplement, ephedrine, has remained stable among college athletes from 1997 to 2005.<sup>2</sup> Also known as ma huang,

ephedrine is considered a "natural" supplement, yet it has been blamed for health conditions such as high blood pressure and abnormal heartbeat.<sup>11</sup> In April 2004 the Food and Drug Administration banned the sale of supplements containing ephedrine, due to its "unreasonable risk of illness or injury."<sup>12</sup>

In a national study, nearly 3 percent of student athletes were found to use ephedrine. Women's ice hockey has the highest rate of ephedrine use, close to 12 percent. Female gymnasts quickly increased their use of ephedrine, from 1 percent in 1997 to 8 percent in 2001. That rate dropped back to 1 percent in 2005. Water polo has the most male ephedrine users, with a rate of almost 8 percent.<sup>2</sup>



## Anabolic Steroids and Amphetamines

An NCAA national study in 2005 found that anabolic steroids are not widely used by intercollegiate athletes. The user rate was 1 percent, a significant drop from 5 percent in 1989.<sup>2</sup> Still, this rate is more than triple the national rate by non-athlete students.<sup>13</sup> Two percent of male football players used anabolic steroids, a drop from nearly 10 percent in 1989.<sup>2</sup>

Athletes maintained the same usage rate of amphetamines, hovering at 3 percent, between 1989 and 2001. The rate increased to 4 percent in 2005. The sport with the most amphetamine use by men is rifle shooting, with 8 percent of participants using. Among female athletes, the most prevalent use was by softball players, at about 5 percent.<sup>2</sup>



## Marijuana

Past NCAA surveys revealed a sharp decrease in marijuana use between the late 1980s and early 1990s (see table 1). In a reversal of that trend, more than 28 percent of the athletes surveyed in 1997 reported using marijuana at least once during the previous year. This figure dropped to 20 percent in 2005.

The majority of the athletes surveyed in 2005 had started using marijuana prior to coming to college. Specifically, 66 percent of users started in high school, 12 percent started during their freshman

year in college, and 6 percent after their freshman year in college. By ethnic group, the highest rate of marijuana use was found among Caucasians.

Among athletes, 63 percent of marijuana users said they use the drug to serve recreational or social purposes and 35 percent said that they use it because it makes them feel good. Among those not using marijuana, 15 percent said they refrained because they had no desire for the drug's effects, 37 percent refrained because they were concerned about their health, and 11 percent refrained because it was against their religious or moral beliefs.

**Table 1: Annual Marijuana Usage Among College Athletes 1985–2001<sup>3</sup>**

Year	Annual Usage
1985	35%
1989	28%
1993	21%
1997	28%
2001	27%
2005	20%



## Other Drugs

This same 2005 NCAA study found that roughly 2 percent of athletes used cocaine during the previous 12 months, a sharp decline from the 5 percent of athletes who used cocaine in 1989. Over 2 percent of Division I athletes reported using psychedelic drugs during the previous year.<sup>2</sup>



## Strategies for Institutions of Higher Education

### *Promoting Alcohol- and Drug-Free Social, Recreational, and Extracurricular Options and Public Service*

- Develop team-building exercises or programs for athletes that incorporate alcohol-free recreational activities.
- Coordinate community service and volunteer opportunities for student athletes.
- Organize community service Spring Break activities for student athletes.

## **Creating a Social, Academic, and Residential Environment That Promotes Healthy Social Norms**

- Develop social norms marketing campaigns to address exaggerated misperceptions of alcohol and other drug abuse among student athletes.
- Promote a healthy environment through the recruitment and admissions procedures for student athletes. Oversee prospective student athlete placement for weekend visits with responsible athletes. Explicitly state to interested applicants that alcohol and other drug use is not tolerated.
- Make available substance-free residence options and encourage student athletes to use them.
- Educate faculty and staff about behavioral indicators, student norms, and cultural attitudes related to high-risk or illegal alcohol use.
- Encourage faculty and athletics personnel to engage in a higher level of contact with students.

## **Limiting Availability and Access**

- Prohibit alcohol use in sports stadiums and/or promote a limit to the hours of alcohol sales at sporting events.
- If alcohol is served at sporting events, reduce container size of alcoholic beverages.
- If alcohol is served at sporting events, encourage limitations regarding quantity per sale.
- Prohibit alcohol use at tailgating events.
- Require any and all on-campus alcohol servers to be registered and trained.

## **Limiting Marketing and Promotion of Alcohol**

- Restrict alcohol advertising in sports stadiums and on athletics publications.
- Reduce marketing and promotion targeted at athletes. Work with local bar owners to limit such marketing.

## **Enforcing Campus Policy and State and Local Laws**

- Communicate campus alcohol and other drug policies clearly and frequently to athletes, including consequences for violations.
- Create and enforce policies that limit team participation for alcohol and other drug use.

- Communicate and enforce substance-free training requirements for student athletes.
- Expand training rules to year-round.



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# RESOURCES

The Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse and Violence Prevention



## Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools (OSDFS)

U.S. Department of Education  
<http://www.ed.gov/osdfs>; 202-245-7896

OSDFS supports efforts to create safe schools, respond to crises, prevent alcohol and other drug abuse, ensure the health and well-being of students, and teach students good character and citizenship. The agency provides financial assistance for drug abuse and violence prevention programs and activities that promote the health and well-being of students in elementary and secondary schools and institutions of higher education.

## The U.S. Department of Education's Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse and Violence Prevention

<http://www.higheredcenter.org>; 1-800-676-1730; TDD Relay-friendly, Dial 711

The Higher Education Center offers an integrated array of services to help campuses and communities come together to identify problems; assess needs; and plan, implement, and evaluate alcohol and other drug abuse and violence prevention programs. Services include training; technical assistance; publications; support for the Network Addressing Collegiate Alcohol and Other Drug Issues; and evaluation activities. The Higher Education Center's publications are free and can be downloaded from its Web site.



## Other Organizations

### BACCHUS and GAMMA Peer Education Network

<http://www.bacchusgamma.org>; 303-871-0901

BACCHUS (Boosting Alcohol Consciousness Concerning the Health of University Students) and GAMMA (Greeks Advocating Mature Management of Alcohol) is an international association of college- and university-based peer education programs focusing on alcohol abuse prevention,

sexual assault prevention, and other student health issues. The group provides training, technical assistance, educational materials, and national and regional forums to support campus peer educators. BACCHUS and GAMMA has more than 700 campus chapters and 25,000 active members around the country. The organization receives partial funding from the alcohol industry.

BACCHUS and GAMMA developed the Certified Peer Educator Training Program, a comprehensive 13-hour training for peer educators, residence hall staff, and Greek society leaders to help them develop the skills necessary to lead workshops on substance abuse prevention and other topics related to student health. The training also includes an instructional video, a facilitator's manual, and student workbooks.

In collaboration with the National Collegiate Athletic Association, BACCHUS and GAMMA has developed the Student Athletes as Peer Educators Training Program, a specialized version of the Certified Peer Educator Program. The program for athletes also includes a video, facilitator's manual, and student work sheets. In addition, the organization distributes many other resource books, pamphlets, videos, and posters.

### Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) Program

<http://www.sportinsociety.org/mvp.php>;  
617-373-4025

This program uses multiracial teams of former collegiate and professional male athletes to talk with boys and young men about attitudes toward women, violence, and masculinity. Through the program, researchers seek to reduce men's violence against women by inspiring athletes to challenge and reconstruct predominant male norms that equate strength in men with dominance over women. An MVP key premise is that male student athletes can help to delegitimize "rape-supportive" and "battering-supportive" attitudes by publicly rejecting them. The project specifically encourages participants to use their status among peers on campus to promote healthier attitudes and behavior toward women.

## National Collegiate Athletic Association

<http://www.ncaa.org>; 317-917-6222

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) sponsors CHAMPS/Life Skills, a comprehensive educational program for college athletes that addresses a number of issues, including alcohol and other substance use. To participate in the CHAMPS/Life Skills Program, colleges must apply to the NCAA. Once enrolled in the program, colleges receive workshop materials, training, and technical assistance from the NCAA.

The organization also sponsors Athletic Prevention Programming and Leadership Education (APPLE) conferences for coaches, trainers, students, and health educators, working in conjunction with the University of Virginia's Institute for Substance Abuse Studies.

"Drugs and the Collegiate Athletes" is a four-part video series that addresses the drugs more often used by student athletes, plus environmental factors that increase risk of alcohol and other drug use among student athletes. The series comes with a comprehensive leader's guide.

Other educational materials for substance abuse prevention among college athletes are also available from the NCAA. The organization awards grants to support substance abuse prevention programs targeting college athletes and related research, which are partially funded by Anheuser-Busch.

## The Network Addressing Collegiate Alcohol and Other Drug Issues

<http://www.thenetwork.ws>; see Web site for telephone contacts by region

The Network Addressing Collegiate Alcohol and Other Drug Issues (Network) is a national consortium of colleges and universities formed to promote healthy campus environments by addressing issues related to alcohol and other drugs. Developed in 1987 by the U.S. Department of Education, the Network comprises member institutions that voluntarily agree to work toward a set of standards aimed at reducing alcohol and other drug problems at colleges and universities. It has more than 1,600 members nationwide.