

## REFLEXÕES ACERCA DO PANORAMA DE CONSUMO DE ÁLCOOL E/OU OUTRAS DROGAS ENTRE ESTUDANTES UNIVERSITÁRIOS

## REFLECTIONS ABOUT THE PANORAMA OF CONSUMPTION OF ALCOHOL AND/OR OTHER DRUGS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

## REFLEXIONES SOBRE EL PANORAMA DEL CONSUMO DE ALCOHOL Y OTRAS DROGAS ENTRE ESTUDIANTES UNIVERSITARIOS

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### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** Refletir acerca do panorama de consumo de álcool e/ou outras drogas entre estudantes universitários e suas implicações na vida acadêmica e pessoal desses estudantes. **Método:** Trata-se de uma reflexão teórica, construída com base na leitura de estudos científicos atuais que atendem à seguinte questão norteadora: Qual o panorama de consumo de álcool e/ou outras drogas entre estudantes universitários? Os artigos analisados levaram à concretização da seguinte categoria: "Panorama de consumo de álcool e/ou outras drogas entre estudantes universitários". **Resultados:** Verificou-se que o álcool foi a droga de maior consumo entre os estudantes. Embora exista uma preocupação entre os pesquisadores em relação ao uso de álcool e/ou outras drogas entre universitários ficou evidente que o início do consumo dessas substâncias entre universitários não se encontra, necessariamente, vinculado ao ingresso na universidade. **Conclusão:** Constatou-se o uso cada vez mais excessivo de substâncias psicoativas entre os jovens universitários, sendo preciso que a universidade cumpra seu papel, criando políticas efetivas para o enfrentamento das questões referentes ao uso de álcool e/ou outras drogas, com vistas às ações de prevenção e de tratamento, que contemplem as reais necessidades dos jovens universitários, sem nenhum tipo de discriminação.

**Descritores:** Bebidas alcoólicas; Drogas ilícitas; Estudantes.

### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** to reflect about the panorama of consumption of alcohol and/or other drugs among college students and its implications in their academic and personal life. **Method:** theoretical reflection, based on the reading of current scientific studies that answer the following guiding question: What is the panorama of alcohol and/or other drugs consumption among university students? The articles analyzed led to the implementation of the following category: "Panorama of consumption of alcohol and/or other drugs among college students". **Results:** it was found that alcohol was the major drug consumed by students. Although there is a concern among researchers concerning the use of alcohol and/or other drugs among university students, it was evident that the beginning of the consumption of these substances by college students is not necessarily linked to the University. **Conclusion:** there have been increasingly excessive use of psychoactive drugs among university students, and the University fulfill your role by creating effective policies to deal with the issues relating to the use of alcohol and/or other drugs, with actions related to prevention and treatment related to the real needs of the young university students, without any discrimination.

**Descriptors:** Alcoholic beverages; Street drugs; Students.

### RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** reflexionar sobre el panorama del consumo de alcohol y otras drogas entre estudiantes universitarios y sus implicaciones en la vida personal y académica de estos estudiantes. **Método:** Se trata de una reflexión teórica, construida con base en la lectura de estudios científicos actuales que atienden la siguiente cuestión orientadora: ¿Cuál es el panorama de consumo de alcohol y / o otras drogas entre estudiantes universitarios? Los artículos analizados condujeron a la aplicación de la siguiente categoría: "Panorama del consumo de alcohol y otras drogas entre estudiantes universitarios". **Resultados:** se encontró que el consumo de alcohol era lo mayor entre los estudiantes. Aunque haya una preocupación entre los investigadores sobre el uso de alcohol y otras drogas entre estudiantes de Universidades, es evidente que el inicio del consumo de estas sustancias entre los estudiantes universitarios no está necesariamente vinculado a las Universidades. **Conclusión:** ha habido el uso cada vez más excesivo de drogas psicoactivas entre estudiantes de las Universidades. Ellas cumplen con su rol social mediante la creación de políticas eficaces para abordar las cuestiones relacionadas con el uso de alcohol y otras drogas, con vistas a acciones de prevención y tratamiento, necesidades reales de los jóvenes universitarios, sin discriminación alguna.

**Descriptores:** Bebidas alcohólicas; Drogas ilícitas; Estudiantes.

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## INTRODUCTION

The abuse of drugs such as alcohol, tobacco and other psychoactive substances (PAS) is a worldwide phenomenon considered a public health problem, with physical, mental, socioeconomic-cultural and legal repercussions<sup>(1-3)</sup>.

These repercussions include the suffering of the drug users and their families, damage to school and professional life, the growth of crimes and illicit enrichment, in addition to contributing to the increase in the global burden of disease, resulting in losses due to years lived with disability and premature death<sup>(3-4)</sup>.

Estimates show that about 243 million people, the equivalent of 5% of the world's population aged 15-64, use illicit drugs at least once a year. In terms of substance use, men are generally three times more likely to use illicit drugs compared to women. Regarding problematic consumption, the number remains stable, around 27 million people<sup>(3)</sup>.

In this context, college students deserve special attention from researchers and health and education professionals because the use of alcohol and other drugs in the academic environment is increasingly widespread. Factors such as leaving the family nucleus, the process of adapting to the new environment, the difficulty of insertion in new groups, and the availability of these substances increase the students' vulnerability to drug use<sup>(5-6)</sup>.

In terms of gender, there is a growing similarity of alcohol and other drug use between men and women, especially in the university environment<sup>(7-8)</sup>.

In the First National Survey on Use of Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drugs among College Students held in the 27 Brazilian state capitals, 86.2% of the students reported having consumed alcoholic beverages and 48.7% said to have already used other drugs in life. This survey found that 77.3% of men and 66.6% of women reported having consumed alcohol in the last 12 months<sup>(9)</sup>.

The difference between men and women as to use of substances, especially alcohol, has become an important topic of discussion and research, considering the different needs, reasons and motivations that lead them to this behavior<sup>(10)</sup>. Thus, the question is: what is the current situation of alcohol and other drug use among college students?

Given the above, the aim of the study is to reflect on the current situation of alcohol and/or other drug use among college students.

## METHOD

This is a study with a theoretical-reflexive approach about the consumption of alcohol and/or other drugs among college students and its implications in academic and personal life. To allow the reflection, articles in Portuguese, Spanish and English published in the last 15 years and focusing on the theme were retrieved. The justification for choosing this time interval was that several surveys have been carried out by the Brazilian Center for Information on Psychotropic Drugs (CEBRID) and the National Secretariat for Drug Policy (SENAD) since 2001.

The literature was searched in the Latin American and Caribbean Health Science Literature (LILACS), Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System Online (MEDLINE), Spanish Bibliographic Index of Health Sciences (IBECs), American Psychological Association (APA), and National Center for Biotechnology Information (PUBMED) databases, and in the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SCIELO), Regional Library of Medicine (BIREME) and Cochrane Library virtual libraries. The Health Sciences descriptors (DeCS) and Medical Subject Headings (MESH) were "alcohol", "drugs", "students", using the boolean operator "and".

After reading and analyzing the articles, we built the central theme: Overview of alcohol and/or other drug use among college students.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Overview of alcohol and/or other drug use among college students

Currently, the consumption of PAS has become a frequent phenomenon, especially among young people inserted in the college context.

A quantitative study aimed at ascertaining the crucial characteristics of the epidemiological and drug addiction profile of the college population of the University of El Salvador through the application of a self-administered structured questionnaire found the prevalence of females in the population studied. Alcohol was the most commonly consumed drug among students, followed by tobacco. There was a similar behavior between the sexes toward the use of alcohol. As to tobacco consumption, there was a prevalence of females. The authors observed that most students were not aware of the impact of alcohol and/or other drug consumption on academic performance<sup>(11)</sup>.

Research designed to identify the patterns of Simultaneous Consumption of Multiple Drugs (SCMD) and their legal, social and gender implications among health science college students found an occurrence of 27.9% of SCMD among a sample of 275 Nursing, Medicine, Pharmacy, Nutrition, Physical therapy and Occupational Therapy students. The combination of alcohol and marijuana was observed in 30% of the students in the last two months, followed by the combination of alcohol and prescription drugs. Simultaneous Consumption of Multiple Drugs was more frequent among men. The authors found that SCMD among health students was attributed to the anguish of dealing with the pain and suffering of their patients, the natural crisis of age and, often, early college admission<sup>(6)</sup>.

A quantitative study conducted with 437 students in a higher education institution in Vale do Paraíba aimed at identifying the number of college students who were using psychoactive substances, to verify which factors influenced this consumption and the number of college students who needed interventions<sup>(12)</sup>.

It was evidenced that the first experience with alcoholic beverages among the undergraduates occurred in the age group of 13 to 18 years, and alcohol and tobacco were the most consumed drugs. There was also a relationship between missing classes and consumption of alcohol in periods of classes. Most students denied that such attitude hampered their academic performance<sup>(12)</sup>.

In a quantitative, prospective, cross-sectional and observational study conducted with 345 students, 239 of them female, whose objective was to determine the profile of licit and illicit drug use by college students from a private institution in the city of Quixadá, in the state of Ceará, it was found that the use of drugs such as alcohol and cocaine was prevalent. Students highlighted the influence of friends (13%) and the feeling of fun (21%) caused by drugs as the main motivational factors for use<sup>(13)</sup>.

The authors pointed out that 46% of the students stated that they had no apparent motives for drinking and 39% considered college parties conducive to alcohol use. Another important fact was that 71% of college students made non-prescribed use of medications. Among participants, alcohol and/or other drug use were related to higher family income. For the authors, the college environment influences the abuse of psychoactive substances<sup>(13)</sup>.

In a cross-sectional, descriptive, exploratory study with 313 first and fourth year undergraduate nursing students whose objective was to analyze the relationship between risk factors, spirituality levels and alcohol use among students from two nursing courses, it was found that the risk factors associated with alcohol consumption were: male gender, being married, having low level of spirituality and not having religious affiliation. The results revealed that highest alcohol consumption was present among males; spirituality was not considered a protective factor against alcohol use; and the age group of 20 years represented the majority of the population that drank excessively, got drunk regularly, and showed problems with drinking constantly associated with this drinking pattern<sup>(14)</sup>.

It was also found that regarding religious affiliation, there were significant differences in the AUDIT classification and the spirituality scale. However, the authors believed that some aspects of religiosity, such as church attendance, religious preference and the act of praying, had a protective influence on substance use among college students<sup>(14)</sup>. In contrast to these results, another study found religion to be an important protection factor against consumption of alcohol and other drugs<sup>(13)</sup>.

A descriptive study with correlational design was conducted with the objective of knowing the factors associated with alcohol use and abuse among students and relating it to the consequences of this habit. The sample consisted of 351 students from the first and second to last years of health courses, of which 238 were women. The researchers applied a questionnaire with sociodemographic information and the AUDIT for data collection. The study showed that 202 (57.5%) students had the habit of drinking alcohol. The age of onset of this consumption was from 10 to 17 years<sup>(15)</sup>.

Among the factors that most influenced early alcohol consumption were the media, and consumption by relatives and friends. The authors pointed out that admission to college, distance from the family nucleus, and establishment of new friendship bonds favored the opportunities for consumption of alcohol and other drugs, especially by students with greater psychosocial vulnerability. Moreover, the academic environment has become conducive to drug experimentation because at this point of the life of young people, they participate in numerous

social activities and events. Among the consequences of problematic drinking identified in this study are blackouts, alcoholic coma, and car accidents. For the authors, the knowledge acquired over the academic years about the damage caused by alcohol in the human body had no effect on consumption among the students investigated. They suggest the inclusion of discussions about the National Alcohol Policy plus other related laws in academic courses during undergraduate training, so as to increase awareness among young people<sup>(15)</sup>.

In a descriptive, quantitative study that aimed to describe drug use among first-year college students in order to know the pattern of substance use and to compare the relationship between drug use, risk behaviors and gender, it was found that the average age of first consumption was 13 years. The results indicated that the consumption of alcohol and other drugs probably occurred before entering college<sup>(16)</sup>.

Similar results were found in other studies in which they found that the first experience with alcoholic beverages among undergraduates occurred in the age group of 13 to 18 years. It is understood that college enrollment was not necessarily the main reason why students began using psychoactive substances, especially alcohol. The use of these substances, as well as the frequency of use, were rather the result of a set of interrelated factors that triggered the entire process<sup>(12-15)</sup>.

Regarding gender, men get drunk more often than women, as well as are more often involved in alcohol and other drug poisonings. Regarding the behavior of substance use among students, 53 (26.5%) of the boys liked to drink enough to be a little "high", while among girls, 37 (18.5%) did not drink. Among those girls who drank, 30 (15%) liked to drink from one to two sips. When asked about the possibility of finding help for problems arising from psychoactive substance use, 99 (49.5%) of the students felt it was possible to get help at college<sup>(16)</sup>.

As shown in other studies, alcohol is the substance most consumed by students, followed by tobacco and marijuana. Among the reasons that lead these young people to drink alcohol are fun and escape from problems. Socializing drinking was present among young people. When asked about the possibility of being punished if caught using or carrying alcohol and/or other drugs at college, less than half responded that such a punishment was possible. This fact may be

related to the lack of policies related to drug use on university campuses<sup>(16)</sup>.

A descriptive-correlational research conducted with 80 students aimed to identify whether health students perceived benefits from using tobacco and other drugs, as well as the difficulties to quit. Of the total sample, two-thirds did not smoke; 16.3% were smokers for around 4 to 6 years; and 2.3% had been smokers for over 10 years. Most students reported having no family members who smoked. Most considered tobacco use a problem and it was important to alert the community about this issue. One-third of the students answered that non-smoking behavior was a personal choice, while smoking behavior was often influenced by friends<sup>(17)</sup>.

Regarding alcohol use, more than one third of the sample answered that they would get drunk once a month. About two-thirds of the participants reported that their family members did not drink, and less than one-third reported that more than half were alcoholics. The benefits provided by the drugs perceived by most students were relaxation, pleasure and social acceptance. Barriers to quitting were habit and its effects. A small portion of students did not consider the use of these substances as a health problem and reported the use of other substances as their years of study progressed. For the authors of this research, the insertion of prevention and rehabilitation related to drug use in the subjects taught during the undergraduate course could result in positive impacts on students' behavior, motivating future health professionals to maintain preventive behaviors, as well as encouraging their self-responsibility<sup>(17)</sup>.

A cross-sectional, epidemiological study aimed to evaluate the consumption of PAS and its determinants by students of the nursing course at the University of Passo Fundo, proposing a reduction in use. The study included 266 students enrolled in the first week of March 2007. For data collection, a questionnaire on the use of PAS from the Brazilian Center for Information on Psychotropic Drugs (CEBRID) was used. The results revealed that the majority of participants (82%) were female, had a family income of ten minimum wages, and were Catholics (77.1%). Alcohol was the most tried drug followed by tobacco, stimulants and benzodiazepines. Of the 249 alcohol consumers, 69% reported drunkenness. Among the places where they tried alcohol for the first time were bars, clubs and nightclubs, and home of friends and relatives.

Relatives were cited as the main responsible for introducing alcohol in the lives of students. An important evidence of the study was the fact that the students considered the father, within the family environment, as the greatest consumer of alcoholic beverages. The authors pointed out that adolescents and young adults make up a population that is more prone to consume alcohol, and the cultural legitimacy conferred by various societies on this substance contributed to its consumption<sup>(18)</sup>.

It is noteworthy the heavy consumption by girls in the studied sample and there is a concern with girls who used benzodiazepines and consumed alcohol because this association can lead to coma. The higher consumption of these drugs by women may be due to difficulties faced in coping with problems originated in the socio-family environment, which may increase their predisposition to use these drugs<sup>(18)</sup>.

A quantitative descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted to investigate the use of licit and illicit psychoactive substances among students of the nursing course offered in night hours at PUC Minas, in order to discuss the difference of consumption between genders, thus providing subsidy for future prevention programs. The study sample consisted of 393 students and a questionnaire adapted from the instrument proposed by the World Health Organization (WHO) was used for data collection<sup>(19)</sup>.

The authors found that the female prevalence was of 352 (89.5%), as in other studies whose target population comes from health courses. Alcohol (89.3%) and tobacco (31.3%) were the licit substances predominantly "used in life" and, with regard to the use of illicit psychoactive substances, there was a predominance of anxiolytics (19.0%), followed by inhalants (15.5%), anorectics (13.9%), and marijuana (12.7%). They observed that among female students there was a higher consumption of anxiolytics and anorectics than among male students<sup>(19)</sup>.

An interesting fact identified in this study was that the experience of alcohol use was greater among female participants, as well as early onset of drinking. Generally, the first experience with alcohol by nursing students occurred in adolescence, a fact also found in other studies, reinforcing the idea that drinking occurs before entering college<sup>(20)</sup>. The data identified in the present study are in contrast to those evidenced in another study in which,

despite the prevalence of female students in the Nursing course, the highest consumption of alcohol was present among male students<sup>(14)</sup>.

The fact that the consumption of anxiolytics and anorectics is greater in females was also indicated by another study, which found heavy consumption of benzodiazepines among college girls, and there is a danger of their consumption associated with alcohol to lead to coma<sup>(18)</sup>.

College stressors, such as increased responsibility, anxiety, academic tasks, and financial and social difficulties, tend to make students look for alcohol and other drugs as a way to relieve stressful situations<sup>(19)</sup>.

A qualitative study sought to understand the health-disease process of students living in the of the University of São Paulo (CRUSP) as to the use of alcohol and other problematic drugs by students so as to foster guidelines to act preventively and provide support for this population considering the gender of the students<sup>(20)</sup>.

The collection took place through semi-structured interviews, with closed and open questions about the history of the health-disease process during the previous life and after joining CRUSP. Eight male and female students, residents or regular guests of the seven housing blocks who, at the time of data collection, had been or were involved in problematic use of alcohol and other drugs participated in the study<sup>(20)</sup>.

Data analysis was based on the Social Determination Theory incorporating the gender category. Data analysis resulted in eight empirical categories: The drug in life; Crusp as a favorable space for the use of alcohol and other drugs; Use of alcohol and other drugs: heredity or family influence; Use of alcohol and other drugs as an instrument of escape from reality; Use of alcohol and other drugs and discrimination; Problematic use of alcohol and other drugs by men and women; Problematic use of alcohol and other drugs and mental health; and Alcohol and other drug use and violence<sup>(21)</sup>. Empirical categories brought important issues such as gender differences. In the category "Alcohol and other drug use and discrimination", for example, seven subjects reported having suffered some kind of discrimination. Some of them mentioned self-discrimination, that is, they reproached themselves every time they abused drugs. Importantly, the two women interviewed reported having a great concern with their image

in society due to the problematic use of alcohol and other drugs. This concern emerged from the fact that there is a social prejudice towards female drug users<sup>(20)</sup>.

Another important category was "Problematic use of alcohol and other drugs by men and women: sex and gender differences". In this category there was a three-fold greater tendency of men to become dependent on alcohol when compared to women. The latter, in turn, showed dependence associated with the use of benzodiazepines and barbiturates, a fact that was also reported in another study<sup>(18)</sup>. The risk of women being sexually abused when intoxicated was mentioned by most participants.

According to the authors, there is a subordinate relationship between women and men. Women tend to omit chemical dependence due to prejudice, making diagnosis and treatment difficult. Another striking fact was the culpability of women for being drug users, in the view of themselves and of others<sup>(20)</sup>.

The other categories revealed situations already contextualized in other studies, such as: beginning of consumption of alcohol and/or other drugs, mostly during adolescence; free access to drugs that housing provides; issues related to family influence and violence. For the authors, the research evidenced that college housing did not appear as an element responsible for triggering the consumption of alcohol and other drugs, but as an additional favorable element<sup>(20)</sup>.

As evidenced in the above studies, the use of psychoactive substances among students is characterized as a serious public health problem, which requires the implementation of coherent policies from the state and educational institutions for the better coping, on the part of students, regarding the use and abuse of PAS, prevention and treatment actions<sup>(21)</sup>.

Alcohol was found to be the most commonly used drug among students. However, the consumption of benzodiazepines and amphetamines, mainly by women, has been a recurrent finding in some studies<sup>(6-18-19)</sup>. Another important finding has to do with the beginning of consumption, since most studies reported this beginning happens before college.

Also noteworthy in the present study are the gender differences and the intensity with which social patterns can affect them. Unlike other studies that sought, through collection instruments, to verify the habits, reactions, attitudes and opinions of the target audience<sup>(20)</sup>.

Overall, studies *pointed to an increase* in alcohol and other drug use among women. This result corroborates data from the Report of the United Nations (UN) which highlights that rising incomes and stress are to be essential factors for women to reach a similar level of consumption of that of men by 2020<sup>(3)</sup>.

Although there is concern among researchers regarding the use of alcohol and/or other drugs among college students, it was evident that the onset of use among college students is not necessarily linked to college entry. This statement is portrayed in the studies presented here, in which undergraduates reported their first experience with alcoholic beverages at ages from 13 to 18 years.

Although the college environment does not prompt the onset of consumption, it should be considered that the use of PAS among students can be intensified there, or even stimulated, due to the process of change experienced during this phase of life.

Some factors are articulated in a way that college students are considered vulnerable to the use of alcohol and/or drugs. They include stressors related to academic demands, the need to establish social interactions and integration with other college students in different contexts, and the availability of substances in most of the recreational and leisure events of this population.

Other factors such as distance from the family nucleus, activity overload, and permissive behavior are also linked to adhesion or intensification of consumption of these substances. It is understood that the consumption of psychoactive substances in this group often occurs as a strategy to cope with these stressors.

Also noteworthy are the risk behaviors arising from the consumption of these substances, to which young people are subjected, such as unprotected sex that can result in unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), aggression, and car accidents. The unregulated use of psychoactive substances corroborates a dependence that, depending on the severity, can result in depression, suicide attempt and death.

The phenomenon of psychoactive substance consumption is a matter of concern that requires monitoring by the responsible organs.

It is clear from the studies that the consumption of alcohol and PAS is a reality

among college students, especially among men, and social, cultural and economic issues constitute the factors for their consumption.

## CONCLUSION

The theoretical reflection made it possible to present an overview of consumption of alcohol and other drugs among college students. Although many studies have shown that alcohol is the most consumed drug, and that the onset of use of these substances does not necessarily occur upon entering college, it can be seen from the studies that consumption can be intensified or even increased by the whole process of change that takes place the lives of these young people.

The increasingly unregulated consumption of these substances has, as a consequence, the emergence of risk behaviors that can mark the lives of these students, besides being a contributing factor for an effective picture of chemical dependence.

Although, according to common sense, entry into higher education institutions is related to professional growth, there is another side that the Brazilian State and educational institutions cannot neglect. It is up to the Brazilian State to elaborate and encourage compliance with public policies that minimize the consumption of PAS among young people, especially college students.

Universities are responsible not only for education aimed at professional autonomy, but also for the implementation of activities and opportunities beyond the classroom that can motivate the participation and promote actions that contribute to the satisfaction of college students. Respect for choices, the embracement, qualified listening and referral to professionals, when necessary, are also appropriate.

One of the limitations of this study is the lack of publications with qualitative approach aimed at understanding the reasons why undergraduates adopt an increased use of alcohol and/or drugs, and emphasizing gender issues related to this consumption.

The reflections that emerge from this study arouse the need for further research focusing on the creation and development of effective intervention programs that seek health promotion among college students, considering the vulnerability of this group to consumption of alcohol and/or drugs.

Moreover, as a contribution, this study brings the need to create effective policies in the academic environment to address issues related

to the use of these substances, with a view to prevention and treatment, addressing the real needs of young college students, without any kind of repression and discrimination.

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