

A Weekly FAX from the Center for Substance Abuse Research

University of Maryland, College Park

*Use of Alcohol, Cigarettes, and Marijuana Before Age 16
Associated with Higher Rates of Substance Use Dependence*

Early multiple substance use is associated with higher rates of substance use dependence, according to an analysis of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). One-fourth of adults ages 24 to 32 who reported using alcohol, cigarettes, and marijuana before the age of 16 met the criteria for alcohol dependence at some point in their life, compared to 16% who reported first using any of these substances when they were 16 or older. Furthermore, early users of all three substances were more than twice as likely to meet the criteria for marijuana dependence (21% vs. 8%), and more than three times as likely to meet the criteria for dependence on other illegal drugs (20% vs. 6%). According to the authors, “[t]he strongest predictor of problematic involvement with substances in young adulthood is the additive effect of psychoactive substances used before age 16. Prevention programs that emphasize delayed use of an individual drug—be it alcohol, tobacco, or marijuana—could therefore yield improved outcomes by having a broader focus across multiple substances” (p. 60).

Lifetime Dependence by Age of First Use of Alcohol, Cigarettes, and Marijuana

(n=4,245 users of alcohol, cigarettes, and marijuana ages 24 to 32 participating in the nationally representative Add Health Survey*)

Ever Dependent[†] On:	Started Using All Three Drugs Before Age 16	Started Using All Three Drugs After Age 16
Alcohol	25%	16%
Nicotine	47%	27%
Marijuana	21%	8%
Other Illegal Drugs	20%	6%

*Add Health collected data from a nationally representative sample of adolescents in grades 7 through 12 during the 1994-1995 school years and continued following them into young adulthood with four in-home interviews, most recently in 2008, when they were between ages 24 and 32. Data analyzed for this study only included respondents who reported having ever used alcohol (more than 2-3 times), marijuana, and cigarettes (at least 1 cigarette every day for 30 days) and reported their age at onset of each respective substance use.

[†]Ever met DSM-IV criteria for dependence as of 2008, when respondents were ages 24 to 32.

SOURCE: Adapted by CESAR from Moss, H.B., Chen, C.M., Yi, H-y, “Early Adolescent Patterns of Alcohol, Cigarettes, and Marijuana Polysubstance Use and Young Adult Substance Use Outcomes in a Nationally Representative Sample,” *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* 136: 51-62, 2014. For more information, contact Howard Moss at psych.hmossmd@gmail.com.

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