Substance use and misuse peak in young adulthood, age 18 to age 26. This stage of development is marked by rapid transitions into new social contexts that involve greater freedom and less social control than experienced during adolescence. Concurrent with this newfound independence is an increase in rates of substance use and abuse.

Which factors increase the likelihood of substance misuse by young adults, and which offer protection? A group of researchers from SDRG, the University of Washington – Bothell, and the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services addressed this question for several important reasons:

- The young adult period sets the stage for later adult development. Substance misuse can keep young adults from successfully transitioning into adult roles and responsibilities, with potential long-term consequences.
- A growing body of longitudinal research following children and adolescents into young adulthood and longitudinal studies during emerging adulthood make the identification of risk and protective factors for substance misuse in young adults ripe for review.
- Understanding child and adolescent predictors that remain important, as well as predictors specific to the young adult years, will help guide prevention programs to reduce young adult substance misuse.

Table 1 summarizes risk and protective factors associated with substance misuse in young adulthood that have been identified by at least two longitudinal studies. Several predictors from childhood and adolescence continue to predict young adult substance use, providing early prevention opportunities. Some of these same factors measured in young adulthood also predict young adult substance misuse.

However, some risk factors are only predictive from the young adult time period. Unique young adult risk factors that predict substance misuse in young adults point to the importance of social contexts that involve greater freedom and less social control. Moving out of the parental home, living in a community with laws and norms.
Favorable toward use, and attending college predict increased substance misuse. Young adult social contexts that are predictive of lower levels of substance misuse include work (but not long hours) and graduating from college.

Research has also identified protective or promotive factors that predict lower rates of young adult substance misuse. These include strong bonds to and support by family of origin, marriage and cohabitation, and healthy beliefs. Protective/promotive factor research is limited, and more studies are needed.

Opportunities to prevent the harms of substance misuse in young adulthood through risk and protective factor modification may begin prior to birth and continue through young adulthood. It’s never too early or too late to address parental substance use, poor family management, and bonding to family in childhood, or favorable attitudes and norms toward substance use at work, school, and in romantic relationships in young adulthood.

Currently, college campuses provide the majority of interventions targeting young adults. Interventions incorporating motivational feedback and focusing on risk reduction (in contrast to abstinence-only approaches) are promising with respect to reducing problem substance use. Interventions targeting young adults not in college are also needed. Strategies reducing access to alcohol for those under age 21, increasing taxes, and reducing norms favoring substance use have evidence of effectiveness. Supporting work or educational involvement in young adults who are neither in school nor employed could also reduce risks for young adult substance misuse.

For additional information on this topic, please refer to the original article:

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