



Review Article

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Personality and Psychosocial Factors Are Associated with Excessive Alcohol Use Among Athletes: A Short Review

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Abstract

Several studies have shown that sports is associated with excessive alcohol use. However, there is a paucity of studies focused on personality and other risk factors of alcohol use among athletes in different sports. Therefore, the first aim was to explore underlying reasons for binge drinking and the potential explanatory factors associated with sports and high-risk alcohol use. The second aim was to examine the relationship between personality and psychosocial factors and alcohol use among athletes and former athletes. The results suggested that a high athletic identity, motivational factors, competitiveness, sensation seeking and risk-taking behavior, sports-related pressure, peer influence, commercial and sports culture may predispose to excessive alcohol use especially among team sports athletes. Furthermore, personality and psychosocial factors such as anxiety, depression, aggression, impulsivity, neuroticism and extroversion were linked to high-risk alcohol use. The same factors, especially a high athletic identity, personality and psychosocial factors, were related to binge drinking after an athletic career. Loneliness also might increase alcohol use. When examining alcohol use longitudinally, engagement in sports was not replaced with binge drinking among former athletes if their career did not end suddenly by sports injury or physical activity was continued. In conclusion, the role of psychosocial factors, athletic identity and personal characteristics of individual and team sports athletes play as risk or protective factors for high-risk alcohol use and implications for interventions prioritizing athletes are discussed. The key is to facilitate positive experiences particularly among young athletes that promote engagement and generate a sense of personal fulfillment to prevent high-risk alcohol use. Finally, adaptation to forced retirement from athletics will be challenging if an individual has a high athletic identity, and the active sports career ends suddenly, this might lead to alcohol-related problems. These findings may be useful in healthcare and sports to identify alcohol-related risk factors and prevent high-risk alcohol use among athletes. Further studies should investigate the associations between personality of athletes in different sport types and alcohol use and other factors, such as gender, education, socioeconomic status and social environment during and after their athletic career. Additionally, it is important to examine the influence of social media on athletes.

Keywords: Alcohol, Athlete, Personality, Psychology, Sports, Team sports.

INTRODUCTION

Regular physical activity has various positive health effects [1]. It also plays an important role in the prevention and treatment of many chronic diseases [1], memory disorders [2] and in the treatment of substance abuse and other mental health disorders [3]. The importance of physical activity in promoting public health will continue to grow even more in the future. Therefore, it is crucial to apply scientific data to practice and decision-making to develop more effective implications and solutions for disease prevention and health promotion. Prevention is the most efficient and effective way to promote health and improve quality of life.

However, it is also essential to illuminate the dark side of sports and exercise behavior [4]. Excessive exercise and exercise addiction may cause a lot of health problems [4,5]. Exercise addiction can also be linked to other addictions or mental health disorders, the most common of which are alcohol dependence and eating disorders [6]. Different types of addictions can also occur together [7]. Exercise and alcohol activate the same brain areas, and they stimulate the release of endorphins, which increases the feeling of happiness, and it is addictive [6]. Nowadays, it is important to consider the influence of social media, particularly on young athletes. It is widely studied that social media can negatively affect mental health, and greater social media use predicts poor sleep, depression, poor body image and low self-esteem [8]. It is known that this may lead to eating disorders, for example.

It is very concerning that addictions and other mental health disorders have become increasingly common among younger people in recent years [9]. Addictions can cause serious health problems and human suffering at the individual level, as well as high expenditures in a society [10]. An estimated 209 million people suffered from alcohol dependence and alcohol caused 2.6 million deaths in 2019 [11].

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Recently, it has also been observed that mental health symptoms and disorders among athletes are more common than earlier. Individual sports is associated with mental health problems (i.e. anxiety, depression, exercise addiction and eating disorders), while team sports athletes have a higher risk of alcohol misuse and nicotine use. Explanation for the greater overall mental health risk in individual versus team sports may include relatively more negative self-attribution after failure and less social cohesion or support [12].

However, little is known about risk and protective factors associated with alcohol use among athletes during and after their athletic career. Therefore, the first aim of this review was to explore underlying reasons for binge drinking and the potential explanatory factors associated with sports and high-risk alcohol use.

Personality and psychosocial factors may explain the differences in alcohol use between different sports groups, but scientific evidence of the subject is limited. Therefore, the second aim of this review was to examine the relationship between personality and psychosocial factors and alcohol use among athletes and former athletes.

ALCOHOL USE AMONG ATHLETES AND FORMER ATHLETES

Alcohol use among athletes is highly debated in the media year after year. The relationship between sports and alcohol use is still inconclusive. Many studies have shown that athletes consume more alcohol than non-athletes [13,14,15]. In team sports, especially football, high-risk alcohol use is more common regardless of gender [16], while endurance athletes drink less than other athletes [17]. The findings seem to be consistent with Finnish former male elite athletes [18].

Studies have found that athletes scored higher on the alcohol dependence questionnaire than non-athletes [7]. Athletes also had more alcohol-related sensationalism and negative consequences related to excessive alcohol use than non-athletes [15,19]. However, sports and physical activity have also been found to protect young people from binge drinking [20]. Conservation values among young female and male athletes were associated with a lower probability of heavy episodic drinking [21]. Furthermore, athletes who reported a sense of purpose, higher personal fulfillment, and vigor tended to have lower rates of alcohol use [22].

The findings of Finnish former male elite athletes were relatively consistent with those of other studies that have shown that athletes consumed more alcohol than non-athletes [18], but this was found only among those in midlife, not in later life [23]. Therefore, it seems that engagement in sports might not be replaced with either binge drinking or alcohol dependence among former athletes after an active sports career if it did not end suddenly by sports injury or physical activity continued [23]. It has been recognized that sports career termination causes significant changes in an athlete's personal and social life, which may predispose to excessive alcohol use [24].

EXPLORATORY FACTORS FOR BINGE DRINKING AMONG ATHLETES AND FORMER ATHLETES

Most alcohol-related risk factors among the general population, such as sociodemographic and familial factors, are also likely applicable to athletes [15]. There is less scientific data on why athletes use more alcohol compared to non-athletes [19,25], but there are some motivational factors behind athletes and their reasons for engaging in binge drinking [26]. Sports-induced anxiety or pressure, competitiveness, peer- or teammate-induced influence, and cultural relations between athletes and alcohol may be related to high-risk alcohol use [15,27]. Furthermore, it is generally known that especially beer distributors support sports, and commercials for alcohol are commonly used [15]. Externalizing behavior may associate with excessive alcohol use and alcohol dependence [27,28].

The same factors, especially personal and psychosocial factors, may be related to binge drinking during and after an active athletic career. Studies have found that retirement can lead to excessive alcohol use among older people, who may use alcohol to counter boredom and combat loneliness [29,30]. It has been recognized that sports career termination causes significant changes in an athlete's personal and social life [24]. If an active sports career ends unexpectedly, and an individual has a high athletic identity, adaptation to forced athletic retirement will be challenging [31], and might lead to alcohol-related problems [32].

PERSONALITY AND PSYCHOSOCIAL FACTORS ARE ASSOCIATED WITH BINGE DRINKING AMONG TEAM SPORTS ATHLETES

In many studies, team sports athletes are more likely to be classified as hazardous drinkers and report higher rates of alcohol use than individual sports athletes. Personality and psychosocial factors may also explain the differences in alcohol use between different sports groups, but scientific evidence of the subject is still limited. It is generally known that mental health problems and personality factors are associated with high-risk alcohol use and alcohol dependence across the lifespan, and stress can be a potential trigger at all age groups [33].

In the general population, psychosocial predictors for high-risk alcohol use are externalizing personality traits, anxiety and depression at younger age, while mood, marital and socioeconomic status predict alcohol use in midlife, and social isolation, executive functions, anxiety and depression in later life [33]. Loneliness and depression are more likely to be the predictors of alcohol use particularly among women, while they may be consequences of excessive alcohol use in men [34]. There is evidence from longitudinal studies indicating that binge drinking in midlife, male gender, being unmarried, and the presence of depression and loneliness significantly increase the risk of alcohol dependence development in later life [35].

Motivational factors, sports-related anxiety and pressure, competitiveness, the influence of teammates, and general sports culture may be linked to alcohol use among team sports athletes [27,36]. Studies have also found that team sports athletes are more extroverted and neurotic than endurance sports athletes [37], which may predispose to binge drinking. Anxiety and neuroticism among former athletes may explain alcohol use after an active athletic career [38]. It has been reported that Finnish former power, combat, and team sports athletes were more extroverted compared to controls, while shooters and endurance sport athletes had lower neuroticism scores than controls [39]. Finnish former team and contact sports athletes used more alcohol than endurance sports athletes [18]. In individual martial arts athletes aggressiveness, antisociality, and neuroticism may predispose to excessive alcohol use [40].

LIMITATIONS OF STUDIES

The quality of studies varies quite a lot, and there are some limitations such as alcohol use was self-reported, data were collected on athletes from a single university, studies were focused on limited age and sports groups and levels of athletic participation, and data were cross-sectional. However, one study of Finnish former male elite athletes was a longitudinal cohort study [23]. This allows for a better assessment of causality between athleticism and alcohol use. Self-reported data on health-related behaviors has limitations, but the applied questions on physical activity [41], smoking [42], and alcohol use [43] have been previously validated in studies of Finnish former male elite athletes [18,23]. Finally, athletes and former athletes are selective study groups. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to the general population.

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

These findings may be useful in healthcare and sports to identify alcohol-related risk factors and prevent high-risk alcohol use among athletes during different developmental stages of their athletic career. The results can be applied in practice and decision-making to develop more effective implications and solutions for prevention of alcohol-related problems and health promotion. Steps can be taken to enhance the sports environment and culture for all athletes across individual and team sports to promote overall mental health in the future.

Further studies will be needed to investigate the associations between personality of athletes in different sport types and alcohol use and other factors, such as gender, education, socioeconomic status and social environment during and after their athletic career. Additionally, it would be important to study the influence of social media on alcohol use and other lifestyle habits among athletes in the future.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the role psychosocial factors, athletic identity and personal characteristics of individual and team sports athletes play as risk or protective factors for high-risk alcohol use and implications for interventions prioritizing athletes are discussed. The key is to facilitate positive experiences in sports particularly at younger age that promote engagement and generate a sense of personal fulfillment to prevent high-risk alcohol use. It is also important to consider the personal values of young athletes when promoting healthy lifestyles through sports. Finally, adaptation to forced retirement from athletics will be challenging if an individual has a high athletic identity, and the active sports career ends suddenly, this might lead to alcohol-related problems. The findings may motivate coaches, sports organizations, health professionals, and policymakers to develop models to prevent high-risk alcohol use during or after the end of an active sports career.

Conflicts of interest

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