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## EFFECTS OF DRUG USE ON ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY

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*Felipe David Gomez Bitencourt*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8195-1152>

*Thuani Mello Rosado*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5822-9225>

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**Abstract:** The study investigates the relationship between alcohol and drug abuse and the increase in Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) among adolescents. Adolescence, characterized by intense changes, is a period in which the use of psychoactive substances can lead to risky behaviour, such as unprotected sex. With a qualitative approach, the research reviews the literature on the subject, highlighting the vulnerability of young people, influenced by the search for social acceptance and the effects of drugs. The results indicate a clear association between alcohol and drug use and unprotected sex, aggravated by factors such as pressure from partners and misplaced trust. The study concludes that substance abuse increases the risk of STIs and highlights the need for public policies that integrate sex education, alcohol and drug awareness, and the use of condoms.

**Keywords:** Adolescents; Alcohol; Drugs; Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs); Risk behaviors.

## INTRODUCTION

Adolescence, which begins in the second decade of life, is a critical phase in which the experimental use of alcohol and other drugs can begin to evolve into abusive and problematic use. It is worth noting that alcohol and drug abuse is a factor that increases the risk of exposure to Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), a global public health concern (MOREIRA et al., 2021).

The consumption of these substances offers momentary pleasure, but can be addictive and lead to serious biological, physical, psychological and social damage (SANTOS et al., 2018). It is estimated that more than one million new infections occur every day, with adolescents and young adults aged between 15 and 24 accounting for around half of the new cases (PAPALIA; FELDMAN; MARTORELL, 2013).

The southern region of the country occupies a prominent position in this scenario, with high rates of diagnoses, such an increase is worrying, especially since the use of psychoactive substances is intrinsically linked to risky behaviors, such as unprotected sexual intercourse (MOREIRA et al., 2021).

Given this context, the question guiding this research is: does the abusive use of alcohol and other drugs influence the increase in STI rates among adolescents? In order to explore this question, the study's general objective is to analyze the relationship between the abusive use of alcohol and other drugs and the increase in cases of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) among adolescents.

The aim is to explore the literature on the impact of alcohol and other drug abuse on risky sexual behavior and the preventive practices adopted. The qualitative approach of the literature review focuses on studies that relate the use of psychoactive substances to the increase in STIs among adolescents.

## DEVELOPMENT

According to Cruzeiro et al. (2010), the first sexual experiences in adolescence, influenced by hormonal changes, directly affect young people's decisions. This period requires public health attention due to the risks and emerging social problems (DALLO; MARTINS, 2018).

Brasil (2010) points out that adolescents are a focus of public health, as the search for new experiences and social influence increase exposure to STIs and substance use. During puberty, the increase in dopamine affects cognitive control and decision-making, making adolescents more vulnerable and sensitive to social acceptance (BRASIL, 2010; PAPALIA, FELDMAN, MARTORELL, 2013).

This brain development makes them susceptible to environmental influences, both positive and negative, so substance use can have devastating effects, and it is necessary to un-

derstand the sexual behavior of adolescents in order to identify associated risks (VISALLIG, 2019, apud SALES et al., 2020).

Dallo and Martins (2018) point out that sexuality in adolescence is influenced by factors such as attraction, desire and feelings. Culturally, boys and girls have different perceptions of sexuality, and the male figure is encouraged to assert himself by consuming substances, which can increase vulnerability to STIs (GONÇALVES et al., 2015).

Therefore, unlike puberty, adolescence is marked by a diversity of individual experiences influenced by ideological and social factors, where social vulnerability can be exacerbated by the lack of public policies that guarantee the right to health.

Research by Vieira et al. (2021) in Pouso Alegre - MG revealed that 47% of adolescents began their sex lives early, at the age of 13.8 for boys and 14.5 for girls, with a third of these relationships occurring without a condom. Girls, more concerned about unwanted pregnancy, reported difficulty in negotiating condom use, often not considering themselves at risk due to stable relationships.

Santos et al. (2018) point out that the use of psychoactive substances is a public health problem with an impact on the economy, culture and quality of life. Since the 20th century, drug use has been seen as a collective social phenomenon, and in adolescence, factors such as gender, self-esteem and self-perception influence the first contact with drugs, which can lead to future problems (PAPALIA; FELDMAN; MARTORELL, 2013).

The 2015 PeNSE survey revealed that 73% of school-age adolescents have consumed alcoholic beverages, and 17% have had contact with illicit drugs (ARAÚJO; ALMEIDA; QUINTANA, 2022). It can be seen that early substance use increases the possibility of addiction in adulthood, affecting mental health, education and relationships.

All drugs can be dangerous, and the impact is more related to the frequency and quantity of use than to their composition. Alcohol, widely rooted in culture, is especially present among adolescents, facilitating risky practices by promoting sociability, reducing shyness and generating euphoria.

Excessive alcohol consumption can result in loss of consciousness and an inability to assess dangerous situations, and because it is a central nervous system (CNS) depressant, alcohol becomes attractive before or during sexual intercourse, which can reduce the feeling of pleasure and increase the risk of violence and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (COSTARDI et al. 2015).

So, as alcohol decreases anxiety and the ability to deal with frustrations and social interactions in adolescence, alcohol is also seen as a way of facilitating such interactions, helping to reduce shyness and increase confidence. This is why many young people believe that they need to drink to have fun and connect with others and when they don't consume alcohol in these situations, they may feel that the fun isn't the same (NÓBREGA et al., 2020).

Studies such as that by Strauch et al. (2009) showed that more than 1,000 students reported a link between the use of licit substances and unprotected sexual practices, such as coitus interruptus. Sanchez et al. (2013), in a survey carried out in 27 Brazilian state capitals, revealed that the majority of adolescents who did not use condoms had consumed alcohol and drugs in the previous month.

The IBGE survey (2015) reveals that more than 101,000 Brazilian students have already had contact with illicit drugs, associating the consumption of alcohol and other substances with a greater number of sexual partners. The school environment is fundamental in preventing STIs and substance use, promoting educational actions that reinforce adolescents' autonomy and responsibility.

Studies such as that by Monteiro et al. (2019) indicate that this involvement helps to reduce STI rates. On the other hand, adolescents out of school are more vulnerable, and the Ministry of Health recommends a comprehensive approach to adolescent health, integrating health and education professionals to develop public policies in the context of the SUS (BRASIL, 2018).

Another preponderant factor is the lack of dialogue between parents and children, which can result in risky behavior in relation to STIs, since family ties do not always guarantee open communication, where effective communication between adolescents and guardians strengthens protection and reduces vulnerability (QUEIRÓZ et al., 2017).

Many parents avoid discussing sexuality and STIs out of shame or cultural issues, hindering the education of young people and resulting in a lack of references to address these issues in an educational manner.

Social groups also have a great influence on the sexual behavior of young people, pressuring them to make decisions that can increase the risk of contracting STIs, these risk behaviors usually have multiple factors that contribute to vulnerability, such as the practice of unprotected sex and the use of substances (RAMOS et al., 2020).

According to Sales et al. (2020), substance use before sexual intercourse is a risky practice because it alters perception and judgment, increasing exposure to infections. This is more common among young men, who face additional risks, such as violence and multiple partners contributing to the alarming increase in the transmission of HIV and other Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs).

Between 2004 and 2014, AIDS became the most worrying STI, especially in the Northeast of Brazil, where the infection rate is high among heterosexual adolescents, factors such as early sexual initiation, lack of knowledge

about prevention, multiple partners and unprotected sex have been determinants in this scenario (MAIA et al., 2018).

Many adolescents already face public health problems related to STIs before they reach adulthood, highlighting the lack of access to public prevention policies. STIs, such as hepatitis B and C, syphilis, HIV, gonorrhea and chlamydia, are transmitted mainly through unprotected sexual intercourse and the sharing of sharps.

Data from Freire et al. (2021) show that, in 2017, Brazil registered more than 40,000 new cases of Hepatitis B and C and 42,000 new cases of HIV - it is clear that alcohol and drug abuse is associated with high rates of STIs, unwanted pregnancies, suicides and violence, which is why public policies should prioritize adolescents.

Despite the recognition of STIs as a public health problem since the 1990s and the existence of educational materials, misinformation among young people persists, with factors such as lack of information, limited access, shyness, trust in partners and socio-economic issues influencing non-use of condoms.

Consuming alcohol and other drugs in conjunction with unprotected sex intensifies the reality of the risks faced by adolescents, and it is at this point that health professionals must act as facilitators in sex education, addressing the risks associated with substance use (GONÇALVES et al., 2015).

The combination of crack use and unsafe sexual practices is alarming, as crack consumption, in addition to its disinhibiting effects, is strongly associated with the spread of STIs, such as HIV/AIDS, making it urgent to promote the consistent use of condoms among this population (BASTOS, 2003).

Adolescents who use psychoactive substances in sexual contexts tend to repeat these behaviors, influencing their future decisions (MIRANDA et al., 2018). Restricted access to

public policies and sex education is a challenge, especially in marginalized communities, where social exclusion and high health risks prevail (HORTA et al., 2018).

Therefore, health professionals should act as facilitators in the sexual education of adolescents, considering their curiosities and interests, as well as addressing the risks of substance use. The combination of risky sexual practices and substance use is a determining factor for young people's overall health, with alcohol being one of the main predictors of these behaviors.

## **CONCLUSION**

From what has been discussed, it can be seen that the abuse of alcohol and other drugs among adolescents has emerged as a public health issue of great relevance, especially because of its direct relationship with risky sexual behavior and the consequent increase in the rates of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs).

The analysis carried out in this study ended up highlighting how adolescence, a phase marked by intense physical, emotional and social transformations, provides an environment predisposed to the experimental use of licit and illicit substances, which, when abused, can result in devastating consequences for young people's physical and mental health.

The results of the research indicate that there is a strong correlation between the use of psychoactive substances and the practice of unprotected sex, showing that the use of alcohol and other drugs not only alters adolescents' perception of the risks involved, but also directly influences their decisions in sexual contexts.

The analysis also revealed that despite awareness of the importance of using condoms, many adolescents fail to adopt them consistently, often due to social pressures, expectations of acceptance and the mistaken belief that substance use facilitates sexual experience.

Thus, it is clear that the problem initially raised, whether the abusive use of alcohol and other drugs influences the increase in STI rates among adolescents, was answered in the affirmative, and therefore the proposed objectives were achieved by discussing the practices that favor the increase in STIs.

The data obtained shows the complexity of the relationship between psychoactive substances and risk behaviors, highlighting the need for multidisciplinary interventions. It is essential to explore strategies that promote a family and educational environment open to dialog, enabling young people to make informed and safe decisions about their sexual health.

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