



Research Summaries - Alcohol, Marijuana, Ecstasy

Alcohol and the Teen Brain

California researchers who compared the brains of teen drinkers to non-drinkers found that young alcohol users suffered damage to nerve tissues that could cause attention deficits among boys and faulty visual information processing among girls.

[NPR](#) reported Jan. 25 that researcher Susan Tapert of the University of California at San Diego and colleagues studied the brains of 12- to 14-year-olds, starting before they began drinking and following them as some began using alcohol. Researchers found that those who binged on alcohol did worse on thinking and memory tests, but that the impairment differed by gender.

Adolescents, whose brains are still developing, are at particular risk from brain damage resulting from alcohol use, the researchers concluded. Taper's research showed that teen drinking negatively affected both the white matter (nerve tissue) and hippocampus region of the brain.

The study appears in the December 2009 issue of the journal [Psychology of Addictive Behaviors](#).

Ecstasy Especially Deadly for Young Users, Study Finds

February 3, 2010

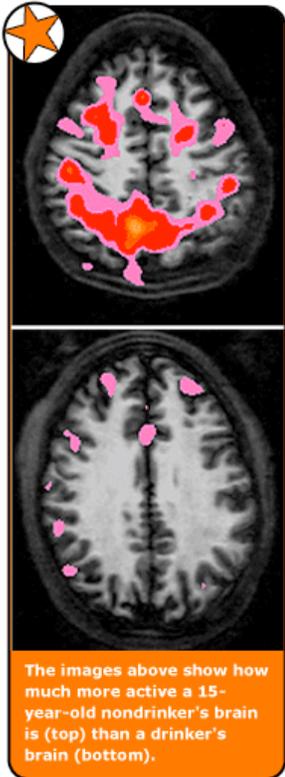
Research Summary

Ecstasy is a stimulant like various classes of amphetamines, but the popular club drug is more likely to kill young and otherwise healthy users, [Reuters](#) reported Jan. 29.

U.K. researchers who studied ecstasy and amphetamine related deaths found that ecstasy-related deaths were more common among "victims who were young, healthy, and less likely to be known as drug users."

Study author Fabrizio Schifano of the University of Hertfordshire said that ecstasy seemed to have a higher "intrinsic toxicity," particularly among users ages 16-24. Schifano speculated that the deaths could be related to the fact that adolescents' brains are still developing.

The study was published in the journal [Neuropsychobiology](#).



The images above show how much more active a 15-year-old nondrinker's brain is (top) than a drinker's brain (bottom).

Image courtesy of Susan Tapert, University of California

AA Attendance Cuts Drinking and Depression, Study Finds

People who attended Alcoholics Anonymous meetings drank less -- and less frequently -- than those who did not attend AA, and also were less depressed, according to research based on the federal Project MATCH treatment study.

The [Los Angeles Times](#) reported Jan. 28 that a study on AA's impact on drinking and depression, conducted by John F. Kelly of Harvard Medical School and colleagues, also found that AA participants who attended more meetings also drank less.

Abstinent AA attendees had fewer symptoms of depression than the general population, but those who continued to drink did not, the study found.

"Some critics of AA have claimed that the organization's emphasis on 'powerlessness' against alcohol use and the need to work on 'character defects' cultivates a pessimistic

world view, but this suggests the opposite is true," said Kelly. "AA is a complex social organization with many mechanisms of action that probably differ for different people and change over time. Most treatment programs refer patients to AA or similar 12-step groups, and now clinicians can tell patients that, along with supporting abstinence, attending meetings can help improve their mood. Who wouldn't want that?"

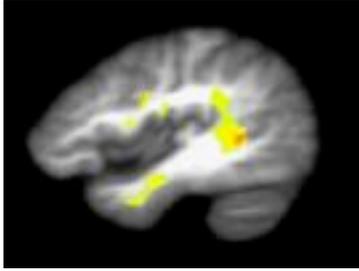
The study was published online in the journal [Addiction](#).

Daily Marijuana Use Could Cause Permanent Brain Damage, Researcher Says

January 7, 2010

Research Summary

Animal studies show that daily marijuana use could permanently alter serotonin and norepinephrine levels in the brain, raising the risk of depression and anxiety, according to researcher Gabriella Gobbi of McGill University.



The [Canadian Press](#) reported Dec. 17 that Gobbi studied the brain chemistry of 18 adolescent lab rats exposed daily to marijuana and found that they had decreased levels of mood-controlling serotonin and higher levels of the stress hormone norepinephrine.

Gobbi said that the effects were magnified because the adolescent brain is still developing. "These permanent changes in the brain are also linked to certain mental illnesses, like schizophrenia," she said. "And we showed that even if we stopped the cannabis use at the end of adolescence, the changes were still detectable in adulthood."

A future study will concentrate on adolescent marijuana use among humans.

The study was published in the journal [Neurobiology of Disease](#).

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