



U.S. Department of Health  
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Administration for Children  
and Families  
Office of Family Assistance

[www.fatherhood.gov](http://www.fatherhood.gov)

# Responsible Fatherhood Spotlight

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## Fathers and Alcohol Abuse

Alcohol abuse has negative consequences for men's health, their relationships with their partners, and their children's well-being. Alcohol abuse rates for men declined in the late 1980s, but increased between 1990 and 2000.

### Definitions

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism defines alcohol abuse according to the DSM-IV classification of substance abuse.<sup>i</sup> Under this definition, alcohol abuse is described as a pattern of drinking that results in failure to fulfill responsibilities, drinking in dangerous situations, legal problems associated with alcohol abuse, and continued drinking despite problems related to imbibing. Individuals who abuse alcohol are not necessarily alcoholics. The distinction between alcohol abuse and alcoholism is that the latter condition also includes a strong craving for or physical dependence on alcohol, the inability to limit drinking, and the need to increase the amount of alcohol in order to feel effects.<sup>ii</sup> In general, when a person's use of alcohol is negatively affecting his or her ability to function as a member of society, it is a sign of abuse.

### Importance and Implications of Alcohol Abuse

Alcohol abuse clearly can harm the individual abuser. However, research suggests that fathers' abuse of alcohol can also affect relationships with their partners and the well-being of their children.

#### *Implications for Fathers*

- The biological effects of alcohol are well documented. In the short-term, alcohol use can lead to aggressive behavior, impaired judgment and coordination, nausea, and vomiting. Prolonged alcohol use can damage vital organs, including the brain and liver. Long-term alcohol consumption also can lead to withdrawal symptoms, such as anxiety, hallucinations, and convulsions.<sup>iii</sup>
- Alcohol has been shown to affect the male reproductive system in numerous ways. Alcohol abuse can reduce testosterone production and cause the testes to atrophy. These conditions can result in impotence, infertility, and decreased secondary sex characteristics, such as reduced body hair, breast enlargement, and a transfer of fat from the abdomen to the hip area. Men's moderate and heavy alcohol consumption histories have been associated with irregularity in sperm, including reduced sperm count, altered sperm shapes, and abnormal sperm motility. The pituitary gland's and hypothalamus' production of important hormones has been shown to decrease or become altered as a result of alcohol consumption.<sup>iv</sup>

#### *Implications for Father's Involvement with Children*

- Alcohol abuse among fathers has been shown to be associated with negative father-infant interactions. Alcoholic fathers show lower levels of sensitivity, positive expression, and verbalization, and higher negative expression, when compared with nonalcoholic fathers. Infants of alcoholic fathers also show lower responsiveness than do infants of nonalcoholic fathers.<sup>v</sup>
- Alcohol abuse can work together with other factors to indirectly contribute to child abuse. Stressful marital relationships caused by substance abuse increase the risk of child abuse, especially in cases in which spousal abuse also is present.<sup>vi, vii</sup> It is possible that low

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socioeconomic status can contribute to and work together with alcohol abuse, which, in turn, can result in child abuse.<sup>viii, ix, x</sup>

- Parental alcohol abuse has also been shown to be linked with childhood sexual abuse. One study found that men’s and women’s childhood sexual abuse was associated with a family history of alcoholism.<sup>xi</sup> Child sexual abusers are often not the alcohol-abusing parent. This fact raises the possibility that parental alcohol use and abuse may leave children more susceptible to sexual abuse from others because of a lack of support and protection from the alcohol-abusing parent.<sup>xii, xiii</sup>

*Implications for Father’s Spouses/Partners*

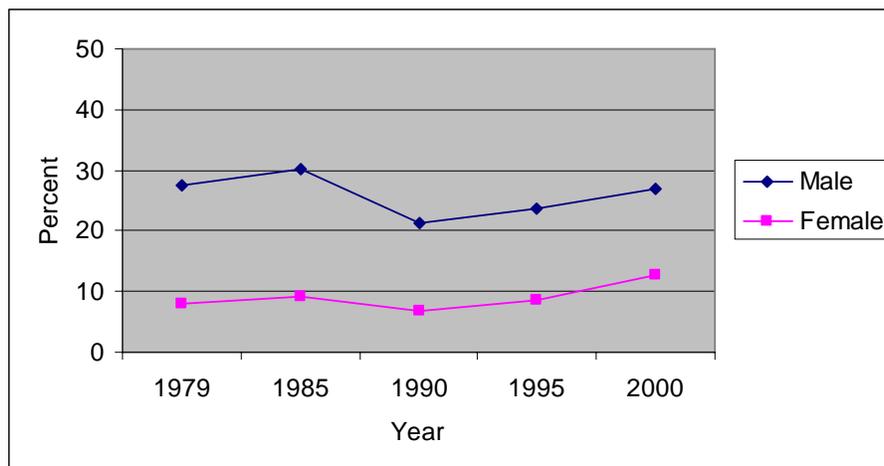
- A father’s relationship with his spouse or partner can suffer as a result of substance abuse. Alcohol abuse has been associated with marital stress, as well as with spousal abuse.<sup>xiv</sup> These low-quality relationships have potential to also harm the child in the household.

**Trends in Alcohol Abuse Over Time**

Alcohol abuse is often measured by binge drinking. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism defines binge drinking as having five or more drinks at the same occasion.<sup>xv</sup> The institute uses binge drinking as a measurement of alcohol abuse because it meets the requirement of abuse due to the harm that it causes individuals.<sup>xvi</sup>

**Figure 1** and **Table 1** show that the percentage of males’ reporting binge drinking over the past 30 days decreased through the late 1980s and increased through the 1990s. Throughout the last two decades, males were consistently more likely to engage in binge drinking than were females.

**Figure 1. Percentage of Males and Females Age 12 and Over Reporting Binge Drinking in the Past 30 Days, 1979-2000**



Source: National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 1979–2000.

**Table 1. Percentage of Males and Females Age 12 and Over Reporting Binge Drinking in the Past 30 Days, 1979-2000**

Year	Males	Females
1979	27.6	7.9
1985	30.3	9.2
1990	21.3	6.9
1995	23.8	8.5
2000	26.9	12.6

Source: National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 1979-2000

### Differences in Alcohol Use by Subgroup

#### *Differences by Sex*

**Table 2** shows that males have higher proportions of reported binge drinking in the past 30 days than do females. Also, fathers have higher proportions of reported binge drinking than do mothers.

**Table 2. Percentage of Individuals Age 12 and Over Reporting Binge Drinking in the Past 30 Days by Sex, 2005**

	Nonparents	Parents
<b>Males</b>	28.2	32.2
<b>Females</b>	13.6	16.1

Source: National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2005

#### *Differences by Age*

**Table 3** shows that fathers and nonfathers between the ages of 18 to 25 have the highest percentage of engagement in binge drinking over the past 30 days, compared with other age groups. Fathers between the ages of 12 and 17 have the lowest proportion of engagement in binge drinking.

**Table 3. Percentage of Males Reporting Binge Drinking in the Past 30 Days by Age, 2005**

Age	Nonfathers	Fathers
<b>12-17</b>	9.6	0.0
<b>18-25</b>	50.4	45.5
<b>26-34</b>	47.0	39.8
<b>35+</b>	22.7	28.7

Source: National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2005

#### *Differences by Education Level*

**Table 4** shows that nonfathers with some college education have the highest reported percentage of binge drinking in the past 30 days. However, among fathers, those with a high school degree or less have the highest reported percentage of binge drinking.

**Table 4. Percentage of Men Age 18 and Over Reporting Binge Drinking in the Past 30 Days by Education Level, 2005**

Education Level	Nonfathers	Fathers
Less than HS	26.5	36.3
HS Graduate	33.0	36.3
Some College	37.9	33.8
College Graduate	27.0	25.4

Source: National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2005

*Differences by Race/Ethnicity*

**Table 5** shows that Hispanic fathers have the highest reported proportion of binge drinking in the past 30 days. Fathers in each race/ethnic group have a higher reported percentage of binge drinking in the past 30 days than do men who are not fathers.

**Table 5. Percentage of Males Age 12 and Over Reporting Binge Drinking in the Past 30 Days by Race/Ethnicity, 2005**

Race/Ethnicity	Nonfathers	Fathers
Non-Hispanic White	29.4	33.1
Non-Hispanic Black	25	27.2
Hispanic	27.8	36
Other	20.8	22.1

Source: National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2005

*Differences by Marital Status*

**Table 6** shows that never-married fathers and nonfathers have higher rates of reported binge drinking in the past 30 days than do with males of other marital statuses.

**Table 6. Percentage of Males Age 12 and Over Reporting Binge Drinking in the Past 30 days by Marital Status, 2005**

Marital Status	Nonfathers	Fathers
Married	20.1	30.5
Divorced/ Separated	35.6	37.4
Never Married	45.5	46.6

Source: National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2005

*Differences by Employment Status*

**Table 7** shows that employed nonfathers have higher reported percentages of binge drinking in the past 30 days than do employed fathers and unemployed men (both those who are fathers and those who are not.)

**Table 7. Percentage of Males Age 12 and Over Reporting Binge Drinking in the Past 30 Days by Employment Status, 2005**

Employment Status	Nonfathers	Fathers
Employed	35.1	32.4
Not Employed*	20.1	29.6

Source: National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2005

\*Does not include respondents in school

#### *Differences by Income Level*

**Table 8** shows that fathers at an income level of \$20,000 to \$49,999 have the highest reported involvement in binge drinking in the past 30 days.

**Table 8. Percentage of Males Reporting Binge Drinking in the Past 30 Days by Income Level, 2005**

Family Income	Nonfathers	Fathers
Less than \$20,000	28.8	30.2
\$20,000-49,999	29.2	36.5
\$50,000-74,999	26.5	30.5
\$75,000+	27.6	30.6

Source: National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2005

## Resources

- The **National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism** offers research and resources to help treat alcoholism and alcohol abuse: <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov>
- **The Partnership for a Drug Free America** provides resources to help individuals with alcohol problems and information about recognizing alcohol problems, finding treatment, and making a recovery: <http://www.drugfree.org/Intervention/>
- The **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration** supplies information on programs dealing with alcohol abuse and national statistics about alcohol use: <http://www.samhsa.gov/>
- The **American Council on Alcoholism** provides resources to identify alcoholism and steps to take to deal with alcohol problems: <http://www.aca-usa.org/>

## Definitions and Measurement

Prevalence of alcohol use among men and women over time was calculated based on results of the National Survey of Drug Use and Health (NSDUH). The results include data on binge drinking, which is defined by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism as the reported consumption of five or more drinks of alcoholic beverages on at least one occasion during the past month.<sup>xvii</sup> Binge drinking is used as a measurement of alcohol abuse because it meets the requirement of abuse due to the harm it causes to binge drinkers.<sup>xviii</sup> Fathers were defined in the NSDUH as males with one or more of their children under the age of 18 living in their household. Respondents were classified as employed if in the past week they had a full-time job, part-time job, or did not work in the past week, but did have a job.

## Data Limitations

In 2002, the methodology changed in the NSDUH. Additions to the 2002 survey and future surveys include incentive payments for respondents, improved data collection quality control, and weighting based on the 2000 census. On the basis of these changes, response rates have increased. A panel of researchers and methodology experts recommended that surveys before 2002 should not be compared with surveys from 2002 and after.<sup>xix</sup> The NSDUH does not indicate if a father has children outside of his household.

## Data Sources

Tables and charts documenting substance and alcohol use among men were gathered from the NSDUH. Tables and charts were created from analysis using data from the NSDUH from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Office of Applied Studies Web site. The NSDUH is a survey of the general U.S. civilian population aged 12 and older. The achieved sample size for the 2005 survey was 68,308 persons. Data on alcohol consumption were gathered from reports from the National Health Interview Survey, published by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

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