



Substance Use Disorders and Suicide

Suicide risk is increased by both legal and illicit substance use. Research has addressed the increased risk for particular substance use (e.g. alcohol), as well as multiple drug use. Substance use disorders as the term is used here, includes intoxication, binge drinking and withdrawal as well as substance dependence and substance abuse. Substance use disorders and suicide occur more frequently among youth and adults, compared to older persons. For particular groups at risk such as American Indians and Alaskan Natives, depression and alcohol use and abuse are the most common risk factors for completed suicide. Alcohol and substance abuse problems contribute to suicidal behavior in several ways. Persons who are dependent on substances often have a number of other risk factors for suicide (e.g. runaway and homeless youth). In addition to being depressed, they are also likely to have social and financial problems. Substance use disorders can be common among persons prone to be impulsive and among persons who engage in many types of high-risk behaviors that result in self-harm.

Alcohol-related Suicides

- Between 40 and 60% of those who die by suicide are intoxicated at the time of death. An estimated 18-66% of those who die by suicide have some alcohol in their blood at the time of death.
- An estimated 1-6% of individuals with alcohol dependency will die by suicide.
- People who are addicted to alcohol are at higher risk if they also suffer from depression. At the time of death by suicide, 50-75% of alcohol-dependent individuals are suffering from depression.
- Adolescents who die by suicide are more likely to use a firearm than another method if they have alcohol in their blood at the time of death.
- Suicide rates among 18-20 year olds were found to decrease among several states where the minimum legal drinking age was raised to 21.

Other Substance Use Disorders

- Intoxication by drugs or alcohol may increase suicide risk by decreasing inhibitions, increasing aggressiveness and impairing judgment. Additionally, substance use such as alcohol increases the lethality of some medications, making it more likely that a suicide attempt via overdose will be lethal.
- Research suggests that adolescents who use marijuana and/or cigarettes are at increased risk of suicide. Studies have also found that as many as 20% of those who die by suicide have used cocaine in the days prior to death.

From the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention: Goals and Objectives for action.
Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service 2001.