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Alcohol use among 13-year-old adolescents: Associated factors and perceptions

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SUMMARY

Objective: To describe the frequency and determinants of alcohol use in a representative sample of 13 years old adolescents, and to analyse qualitatively how adolescents perceive this issue.

Study design: Cross-sectional study with quantitative and qualitative components.

Methods: Two thousand and thirty-six adolescents attending schools in a city in Portugal were surveyed using a self-reported, structured questionnaire. The qualitative component of the study included 30 semi-structured interviews that intended to assess the reasons for and consequences of drinking as perceived by adolescents, and also the preventive strategies they suggested.

Results: Overall, 50.0% of girls and 44.9% of boys reported that they had experimented with alcohol, and 4.7% of girls and 6.6% of boys drink alcohol at least once per month. Most adolescents recognised that drinking alcohol is harmful and an addiction which is difficult to treat, but this perception was not associated with their own behaviour. Adolescents only identified minor and temporary consequences of drinking alcohol, usually related to very high and acute consumption. In order to prevent alcohol abuse and its consequences, adolescents proposed measures based on strict control, legal restrictions and economic measures, some of which are already in place in Portugal.

Conclusion: A high proportion of adolescents had experimented with alcohol by 13 years of age, showing the importance of starting prevention at an early life stage. The results also reflect the importance of reviewing prevention programmes in schools, highlighting the importance of families.

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Introduction

Alcohol consumption is the leading contributor to the disease burden of low-mortality developing countries and the third largest risk factor in developed countries.¹

Poor performance at school, relational problems, unwanted sexual experiences or unprotected sex, delinquency, accidents and injuries are acknowledged consequences of alcohol consumption in adolescence.² In almost all countries, the initial stages of substance use typically include

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experimentation with alcohol during the early and middle years of adolescence.³

Exploring substances which are available in the community can be part of an adolescent's normal psychosocial development.^{4,5} However, surveillance is essential since a subset of young people who experiment with substances such as alcohol, tobacco or marijuana will later become regular users, and will eventually progress to regular use of other serious substances.³

As adolescence is a key period for developing patterns of substance use and abuse that can continue into adulthood, it is the appropriate moment for prevention. Nevertheless, despite the increase in prevention campaigns in schools and substantial dissemination of information about the health risks associated with alcohol consumption, recent studies show that adolescents continue to report alcohol consumption.^{5–7} It is crucial to seek the reasons why these campaigns have failed.

Previous research among adolescents shows a connection between risk-taking behaviours and social perceptions of the behaviour.^{8,9} This led to the assumption that negative perceptions about drinking may be associated with a lower frequency of self-reported alcohol use among adolescents.

Alcohol drinking has been addressed in school curricula, and there is also strict law in Portugal regarding the sale of alcohol to anyone under 16 years of age. However, Portugal is a country with a pattern of heavy alcohol consumption¹⁰ that may determine a high level of permissiveness and the wide availability of alcohol. Among students, the ESPAD report showed that Portugal was the country with the most pronounced increase in alcohol consumption between 2003 and 2007, and the proportion of students reporting heavy episodic drinking during the previous 30 days had increased from 25% to 56%.¹¹

In order to delineate more effective preventive strategies, it is important to identify not only the characteristics associated with consumption and experimentation in adolescence, but also adolescents' perceptions about drinking alcohol. Thus, the purpose of this study was to describe the frequency and determinants of alcohol use in a representative sample of 13 years old, and to analyse qualitatively how adolescents perceive this issue.

Methods

This study had both quantitative and qualitative components: a self-administered questionnaire and a semi-structured interview.

Self-administered questionnaire

During 2003, participants were selected as part of the assembly procedure of the EPITeen cohort, designed to follow adolescents born in 1990 and registered at every public school (state administered) and private school (not administered by local or national governments) in a city in Portugal.

All appropriate schools in Porto (26 public and 24 private) were contacted in order to identify eligible students. All 26 public schools and 19 private schools agreed to participate,

allowing the authors to contact parents and adolescents, and 2787 adolescents were identified (2126 from public schools and 661 from private schools). Forty-four (1.6%) adolescents could not be reached (missed classes frequently) and 2160 (77.5%) agreed to participate. The participation rates were similar in public (77.7%) and private schools (76.7%, $p = 0.603$). In total, 1029 girls and 946 boys with information on alcohol use were included in this analysis.

The local ethics committee approved the study. Parents and adolescents received written information explaining the purpose and the design of the study. Additionally, the study procedures were described in each school during special meetings scheduled according to parents' convenience. Written informed consent was obtained from both parents and adolescents.

The evaluation required extensive data collection using two self-administered questionnaires (one completed at home, the other at school).

The home questionnaire enquired about demographic, social, behavioural and clinical characteristics of the adolescent and his/her family. In this questionnaire, parental education level was measured as the number of successfully completed years of formal schooling, and was used as an indicator of socio-economic status. In the analysis, the adolescents were classified based on the parent with the higher educational level.

At school, during the research team's visit, adolescents completed an additional questionnaire comprising further information on alcohol, smoking and sporting activities.

In terms of alcohol consumption, adolescents were classified as 'never drinker' (had never drunk alcoholic beverages), 'experimenter' (if they had only experimented) or 'drinker' (drink at least once per month).

The questionnaire contained a list of 10 reasons for drinking alcohol, and adolescents were asked if they considered each one to be a motive for drinking alcohol. In addition, they were able to add other reasons to the list. Based on this list, adolescents were asked to state the most important reason why they had experimented with alcohol or why they drink regularly. Participants were also asked if they considered alcohol use to be harmless, dangerous for health and an addiction which is difficult to treat. For each item, they gave a closed answer with three options: no, yes or do not know.

The questions 'Does anybody who lives with you usually drink alcohol at home?' and 'Do you have any friends who drink alcohol?' were used to assess the proximity of alcohol consumers.

Regarding tobacco use, adolescents were classified as smokers if they smoked or if they had experimented.

Taking part in sporting activities was classified as engaging in some physical leisure-time activity, not included in the school curricula, on a repeated basis, for at least 30 min/week.

Semi-structured interview

Based on quantitative results, a qualitative component was added to the study. An interpretative approach was used, which aimed to understand the issue of alcohol use from the point of view of the participants.

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