

## Why you shouldn't lose your virginity under the influence: paper



Kareem Shaheen | The Daily Star

**BEIRUT:** One out of 10 sexually active university students in Lebanon had sex for the first time while under the influence of alcohol or drugs, making them more likely to engage in unsafe sex in the future, according to the results of a new survey.

Students who lost their virginity while under the influence were more likely to have sex with random partners or sex workers and to contract sexually transmitted diseases because they were less likely to use condoms, the researchers found.

“Our findings highlight a strong association between using alcohol and/or drugs at sexual debut ... and various practices that increase youth health risks, including engaging in sexual activity with an unfamiliar partner, having a higher number of lifetime partners, engaging in sexual activity unwillingly,” the researchers concluded.

The paper, which was published on the website of the BioMed Central Public Health journal, was carried out by professors at the American University of Beirut and was led by Lilian Ghandour, assistant professor at the Department of Epidemiology and Population Health.

The study sought to examine attitudes and sexual behaviors of university students, comparing those who were under the influence of alcohol or drugs when they had sex for the first time, and those who were sober.

Out of 943 students at an unidentified, large, private university in Lebanon who responded to the survey indicating they had vaginal, oral or anal sex, 104 reported using alcohol or drugs the first time they had sex, or more than one in 10.

Sexually active students in the survey were predominantly either Lebanese only or had dual citizenship, although non-Arab foreigners were more likely to have sex for the first time under the influence.

University students who lived in dorms or apartments were more likely to have sex for the first time while under the influence than those who lived with their families.

The reason why consuming alcohol during the first sexual experience is concerning is that behavior at sexual debut can have a major influence on sex in the future, the researchers argue.

For example, youth who are under the influence the first time they have sex are more likely to make riskier decisions in the future, such as having sex without wearing a condom or having multiple partners.

The context of first-time sex can also set a “sexual script” for the individual. For instance, a virgin who is coerced into sex is more likely to develop a dysfunctional relationship toward it.

Sandrine Atallah, a clinical sexologist in Beirut who was not involved in the study, noted in particular that women who do not fully consent to having sex while under the influence often feel abused and cheated.

Researchers said that those cases tended to have higher odds of regretting the experience, feeling guilty and having difficulty expressing affection toward their partners.

In the AUB study, the students who consumed alcohol or drugs at their sexual debut were twice as likely to have had their first experience of oral or vaginal sex with an “unfamiliar partner” – either a random person or a prostitute.

They were also more likely to have multiple sexual partners after that first experience, with one in 10 reporting having 11 or more sexual partners. And they were twice as likely to report engaging in a sexual activity that they did not want.

In a 2009 study looking at university students in Lebanon, nearly 48 percent of male students and 7 percent of female students reported having had vaginal sex, a number that the researchers said is likely an underestimation, and highlighting the need for broader sex education.

Few of the students who admitted being sexually active discussed sex with their families, but almost 90 percent were comfortable talking about it with their friends.

The finding is significant because sexually active students who felt pressure to have sex by a certain age were more likely to have first-time sex while drunk or high.

Research on youth sexuality and practices is still relatively rare in Lebanon due to the taboos surrounding the topic.

Atallah said that sex education plays a “crucial” role in promoting healthier sexual practices and discouraging sex under the influence.

But she said sex education often fails by emphasizing the risks and making sex taboo rather than also laying out the benefits of sex.

“The problem usually in sexual education is that we focus on risks and we don’t talk about the positive side of sexuality,” she said.

She said that sex education should empower young people to have a positive view of sexuality, rather than promoting the idea that it is both forbidden and dangerous. Such a view will likely encourage them to have sex while under the influence, when they are less inhibited.

“If you give a positive image of sexuality and you talk positively about prevention, safe sex, pleasure, intimacy and emotions, people will have sex more easily without alcohol and will have safe sex,” she said.

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