

# ASSOCIATION BETWEEN THE USE OF LEGAL SUBSTANCES IN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: AN INTEGRATIVE LITERATURE REVIEW

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## ABSTRACT

The use of legal substances among university students has become a public health problem. These students are more prone/susceptible to developing diseases, premature death, and addiction. The objective is to analyze the relationship between the use of legal substances among university students. This is a literature review developed from bibliographic material obtained from databases such as Scielo, Lilacs, PubMed, and BVS. Data collection involved a thorough analysis of the literature to obtain a complete understanding of the topic. The results obtained through this research highlight that this study scenario reveals a worrying reality that affects the health and lives of university students. After reaching the end of this study, it is clear that, unfortunately, the increase in the use of these legal substances is a common problem among academics from different universities and has affected more and more students.

**Keywords:** alcohol; vaping; university students.

## INTRODUCTION

When entering university, individuals face several challenges. This moment represents a milestone for most young people who manage to pass the entrance exam and also becomes a critical period of psychosocial transition. Students become more independent from parental supervision, take on responsibilities, and make decisions about their own lives. In some cases, this may lead to insecurity and instability, making them more vulnerable to initiating the use of various substances (SANTOS; PEREIRA; SIQUEIRA, 2013).

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When it comes to young university students, it is important to note that choosing a degree is an important step for individuals, who exercise their autonomy through the freedom to choose their higher education course. As a result, this increases the consumption of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs (SIMPLÍCIO et al., 2021). This scenario occurs due to the possibility of purchase, lack of parental control, academic independence, and encouragement from peers who provide opportunities for the consumption of legal and illegal drugs (SIMPLÍCIO et al., 2021).

Consequently, persuasion by third parties in youth to try or use drugs and alcohol in order to be accepted into groups is another alarming factor. Peer victimization increases the risk of consumption. In Brazil, the behavior that best explains such use is related to feelings of loneliness, lack of close friends, depression, and anxiety, or curiosity and need triggered by the influence of groups and friends (HORTA et al., 2020). Thus, this study aims to analyze the relationship between the use of legal substances among university students.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This is a comprehensive review of Brazilian literature, of a narrative type with a descriptive and exploratory approach, which allows the results of primary research on a subject of investigation to be summarized and enables the researcher to understand aspects involving the topic, identify scientific evidence on the guiding question, and direct future scientific studies (ROMAN; FRIEDLANDER, 1998). The bibliographic survey was conducted using the Virtual Health Library (BVS) database, searching the Public/Medline PubMed, Scientific Electronic Library Online (Scielo), and Latin American and Caribbean Health Sciences Literature (Lilacs) databases.

The selection procedure was based on the following criteria, with only titles and abstracts being analyzed for pre-selection. A five-year interval was defined

of five years was defined for the search, thus covering all articles published between 2019 and 2024 on the theme presented in Portuguese. The initial search resulted in 28 articles in the databases. However, only 10 met the requirements for the integrative review. After careful reading of the selected studies and based on the guiding question of the research, we defined which key information should be highlighted in the research.

## **RESULTS**

According to Borges, Schneider (2021), problems related to the use of alcohol and other drugs are a reality in today's society and reveal the existence of different related factors. Among them, vulnerability stands out as an important contributing factor to the abuse of alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs, as well as the family, which is understood as a risk and/or protective factor and as a system directly affected by the problem.

Simplício et al. (2021) in their study, conducted with 124,654 students, showed that not living with the mother increased the prevalence of poly-use of alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs by 62%, and not living with the father increased it by 63%. They also found a significant association ( $p < 0.001$ ) between poly-use of alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs and adolescents who reported missing one or more classes/school days without parental permission.

Among the various psychoactive substances, legal ones, especially alcohol, are the most consumed. They are also the easiest to obtain by this age group (HORTA et al., 2020; SANTOS, PEREIRA, SIQUEIRA, 2013). It is present at most parties and in homes, creating an environment conducive to experimentation and consumption. According to Sousa et al. (2023), alcohol also encourages the use of other psychoactive substances, leading to dependence.

Regarding patterns of use between the sexes, studies show that girls tend to be more involved than boys in substance use, which corroborates the study by Santos, Pereira, and Siqueira

(2013), which showed that females had higher use with a risk pattern (at least moderate).

On the other hand, there are also electronic cigarettes (EC), also known as *vapes*, which are battery-powered vapor dispersion devices containing substances such as nicotine, cannabinoids, and flavorings. Because they are derived from tobacco, they cause the inhalation of carbon monoxide, tar, and many other substances that are harmful to the body (KATHURIA, 2022).

According to Araújo et al. (2022), the use of this electronic device has increased rapidly, becoming an even greater concern for public health due to the health problems caused by them. Given the above, the use and abuse of psychoactive substances may be motivated by the desire to socialize during the university period (HEFNER et al., 2019).

Feliciosi et al. (2024) emphasize that the use of alcohol together with *vaping* results in synergistic effects, increasing the risks of parallel use of these substances. In addition, the consumption of multiple substances has become a greater negative probability for the health of young people compared to the consumption of only one substance.

## **CONCLUSION**

After reviewing the articles, it is unfortunate to note the high rate of alcohol and other substance use among university students. This behavior is sometimes associated with social, academic, and family pressures, along with a desire for socialization and changes in the family environment. The use of such drugs leads to significant health problems, resulting in a lower quality of life and poor academic performance, and may also be associated with anxiety and depression. However, despite being a topic present in everyday life, it is difficult to find recent studies on the subject. This highlights the relevance and opportunity for universities to implement prevention and care activities focused on this issue.

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