

Alcohol use, substance use, and mental health in paramedicine

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Introduction

The amount of empirical research that has investigated alcohol and substance use among paramedics is sparse, at best.

The purpose of this study was to:

1. determine the prevalence of alcohol and substance use among Canadian paramedics;
2. to describe their reported reasons for use; and,
3. to ascertain if a relationship exists between alcohol and substance use and levels of depression, anxiety, and stress.

Our hypothesis was that alcohol and substance use would be prevalent, and significantly related to levels of stress, anxiety, and depression.

Methods

Through the *Canadian Paramedic Health & Wellness* survey, paramedics were asked:

1. if they consumed alcohol or controlled substances
2. to identify their reasons for use; and,
3. to indicate levels of depression, anxiety and stress as measured using the DASS-21.

Analyses were conducted using descriptive statistics and independent samples t-tests.

Results

Based on 2,557 completed surveys, 80.8% of respondents reported they had consumed alcohol.

The average number of drinks consumed in one week (7 days) was $M= 5.97$ ($SD= 6.97$).

Alcohol Use

- 96% reported that alcohol was for recreational purposes
- 4.1% reported it was for pain control
- 5.7% cited “other” reasons
 - the most frequent “other” reason was mental health concerns (42.4%, $n=50$).

Respondents who reported using alcohol for mental health concerns had significantly higher levels of stress, depression, and anxiety ($p<.001$).

Respondents who had mild to severe levels of depression, anxiety, and stress drank more alcohol in the past week than those who had less anxiety, stress and depression ($p<.001$).

Respondents who reported using alcohol for mental health concerns had significantly higher levels of stress, depression, and anxiety ($p<.001$).

Limitations

- Vulnerable to non-response and social desirability bias.
- Cross sectional data; correlation is not causation.

Results

Based on 2,557 completed surveys, 8.2% of respondents reported they had used controlled substances (e.g., narcotics, stimulants, depressants, hallucinogens).

Controlled Substance Use

- 65.2% reported recreational use
- 34.8% for pain control
- 34.8% for “other” reasons
 - the most frequent “other” reason was mental health concerns (42%, $n=32$)

Respondents who reported using controlled substances for mental health reasons had significantly higher levels of stress, depression, and anxiety ($p<.001$).

Conclusion

These results indicate that paramedics do consume alcohol and controlled substances, and for some, that use is related to their mental health.

The significant relationship between alcohol use, controlled substance use, and mental health indicates that there is a need for health and wellness services that address both concerns for paramedics.

Future research must focus on describing and understanding in greater detail how alcohol and substance use may relate to mental health concerns in paramedics.

