

# Findings and Recommendations: *Unhealthy Alcohol Use Among U.S. Service Members and Veterans*



MILLENNIUM COHORT STUDY

## *Millennium Cohort Study Overview*

The Millennium Cohort Study is a large-scale longitudinal cohort study of military personnel sponsored by the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The overarching objective of this study is to evaluate the impact of military service, including deployments and other occupational exposures, on the long-term health of service members and veterans. Participants of the Millennium Cohort Study are enrolled during their military service and complete surveys every 3 to 5 years, both during and after their service. The first panel of service members was enrolled in 2001, with additional panels enrolled in 2004, 2007, 2011, and 2020.<sup>1</sup> There are currently over 260,000 participants from all service branches and components, making it the largest and longest ongoing cohort study of U.S. military personnel. Over the last two decades, the Millennium Cohort Study team has engaged in impactful research covering a broad range of topic areas. Below is a description of research on unhealthy alcohol use among service members and veterans.

## *Summary of Unhealthy Alcohol Use Research*

An initial study<sup>2</sup> examined three outcome metrics for unhealthy alcohol use: heavy weekly drinking, binge (or heavy episodic) drinking, and alcohol-related problems. Reserve and National Guard personnel who deployed and reported combat experience were more likely than those who did not deploy to report all three outcomes at follow-up. The youngest members of the cohort, born in 1980 or later, had the highest risk for all alcohol outcomes compared with those born before 1960.

A subsequent investigation examined factors associated with relapse to problem drinking among current and former military personnel.<sup>3</sup> Similarly to the initial study, being a member of the Reserve or National Guard, and deployment with combat experience were risk factors for relapse. However, those who separated from service were also at risk for relapse to problem drinking, compared with those who remained on active service.<sup>3</sup>

Further research examined associations between certain posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms and the initiation of risky and problem drinking.<sup>4</sup> PTSD symptoms such as irritability/anger, dysphoric arousal, and emotional numbing were associated with the onset of problem drinking.<sup>4</sup> Another study explored the relationship between military factors and continued chronic unhealthy alcohol use among military personnel.<sup>5</sup> While veterans and Reserve/Guard (compared with active duty members) had a significantly higher likelihood of continued chronic use for heavy weekly, heavy episodic, and problem drinking, certain factors increased the risk of chronic problem drinking among active duty members, such as having a history of combat deployment.<sup>5</sup>

### KEY POINTS

- Reserve and National Guard personnel who deployed with combat experience had a higher risk of reporting heavy weekly drinking, binge drinking, and alcohol-related problems at follow-up.<sup>2</sup>
- The risk for relapse to problem drinking was highest among Reserve and National Guard personnel, those separated from the military, and deployers with combat experience.<sup>3</sup>
- Specific PTSD symptoms like anger and numbing were associated with risky drinking initiation.<sup>4</sup>
- Veterans and Reserve/National Guard personnel had a higher likelihood of chronic unhealthy alcohol use compared to active duty members.<sup>5</sup>

## Implications and Recommendations

These studies provide insight on risk factors for unhealthy alcohol use such as initiation, relapse, and chronic use among service members and veterans. Results suggest that preventative measures could be tailored for different military segments based on age, service component, deployment history, and combat experience. Additionally, continued support may benefit those who have experienced combat, those returning from deployment, and those in remission from problematic and unhealthy drinking. Addressing behavioral and mental health factors may prevent future relapse and unhealthy alcohol use. Risk factors identified from this research can help guide the development of prevention and intervention strategies to reduce unhealthy drinking in service members and veterans.



*The National Drugs and Alcohol Facts Week (NDAFW) is a week-long, health observance where stakeholders, including health care providers engage in dialogue with young adults and teens about the risk of substance abuse and addiction.*

*Photo by Aisha Lomax  
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## References

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**Millennium Cohort Study**  
*Protecting Service Member and Veteran Health*



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