

The NSDUH Report

November 10, 2005

Alcohol Use and Alcohol-Related Risk Behaviors among Veterans

In Brief

- In 2003, an estimated 56.6 percent of veterans used alcohol in the past month compared with 50.8 percent of comparable nonveterans
- An estimated 13.2 percent of veterans reported driving while under the influence of alcohol or illicit drugs in the past year compared with 12.2 percent of comparable nonveterans
- Daily cigarette use was more common among veterans, with an estimated 18.8 percent smoking cigarettes daily in the past month compared with 14.3 percent of comparable nonveterans

The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) represents a unique source of epidemiological data on alcohol use by veterans. Alcohol misuse is associated with increased risk of injuries, motor vehicle crashes, and loss of productivity, as well as physical and mental health problems.¹ Excessive alcohol use, combined with frequent cigarette smoking, is a risk factor for cardiovascular disease and lung cancer, and poses additional health risks that include mouth, throat, and esophageal cancer.²

This report provides estimates of alcohol use and alcohol-related risk behaviors for the year 2003 derived from a logistic regression model³ in which 2000–2003 NSDUH data were pooled to provide more precise measures of differences between veterans and a nonveteran comparison group. To make valid comparisons, a “standardized”

nonveteran group was constructed by adjusting the weights of the NSDUH sample to reflect the age, gender, and geographic distribution of veterans as observed in benefit eligibility data collected by the Veterans Health Administration.

NSDUH asks respondents to report on their use of alcohol and cigarettes within the past month, as well as the frequency and quantity of use. Binge alcohol use is defined as drinking five or more drinks on the same occasion (i.e., at the same time or within a couple of hours of each other) on at least 1 day in the past 30 days. Heavy alcohol use is defined as drinking five or more drinks on the same occasion on each of 5 or more days in the past 30 days; all heavy alcohol users are also binge alcohol users. Respondents also were asked about veteran status; a veteran is defined as an individual who formerly served in any of the U.S. Armed Forces (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, etc.).

Veteran Characteristics

In 2003, there were an estimated 25 million veterans comprising roughly 11.5 percent of the 217 million non-institutionalized civilians aged 17 or older in the United States. Approximately 93 percent of veterans are male, and 8.4 percent were between the ages of 17 and 34. An estimated 30.1 percent were between the ages of 35 and 54, 42.3 percent were between the ages of 55 and 74, and 19.2 percent were aged 75 or older.

Figure 1. Percentages of Persons Aged 17 or Older Reporting Past Month Alcohol Use, Binge Alcohol Use, and Heavy Alcohol Use, by Veteran Status: 2003

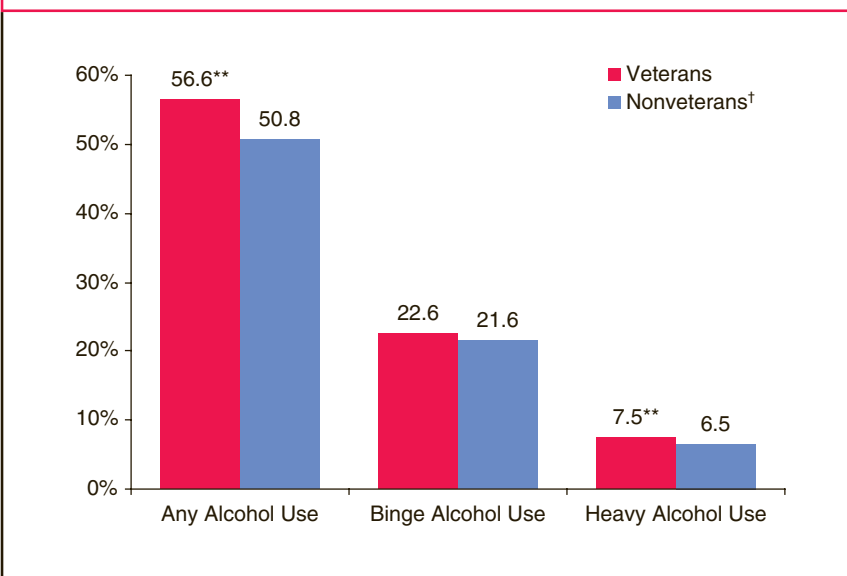
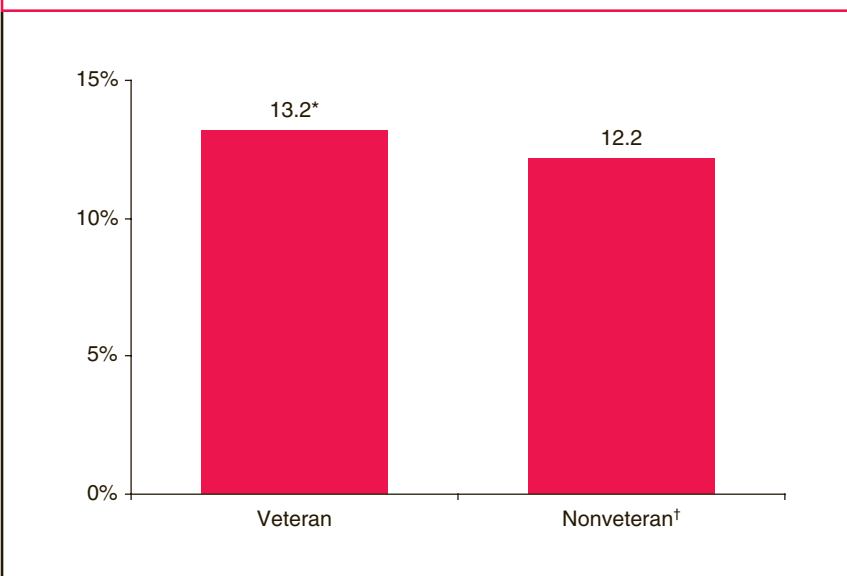


Figure 2. Percentages of Persons Aged 17 or Older Reporting Driving Under the Influence of Alcohol or Illicit Drugs in the Past Year, by Veteran Status: 2003

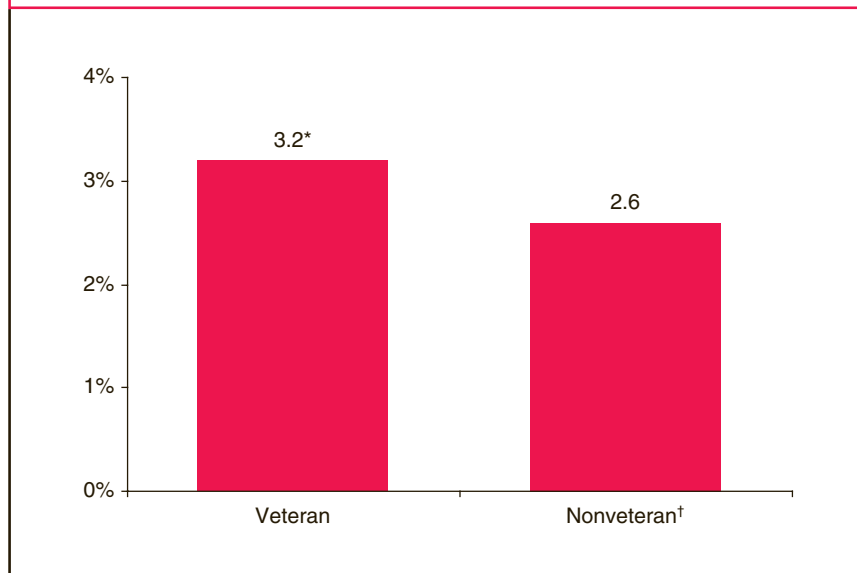


Alcohol Use

An estimated 56.6 percent of veterans used alcohol in the past month compared with 50.8 percent of their nonveteran counterparts in 2003 (Figure 1).

Heavy use of alcohol also was more prevalent among veterans, with an estimated 7.5 percent of veterans drinking heavily in the past month compared with 6.5 percent of their nonveteran counterparts.

Figure 3. Percentages of Persons Aged 17 or Older Reporting Daily Cigarette and Heavy Alcohol Use in the Past Month, by Veteran Status: 2003



Driving Under the Influence

An estimated 13.2 percent of veterans reported driving while under the influence of alcohol or illicit drugs in the past year compared with 12.2 percent of comparable nonveterans (Figure 2).

Alcohol and Cigarette Use

As was the case with heavy alcohol use, heavy (i.e., daily) cigarette use was more common among veterans, with an estimated 18.8 percent smoking cigarettes daily in the past month compared with 14.3 percent of comparable nonveterans ($p < .01$). Veterans also were more likely to smoke frequently and drink heavily, with 3.2 percent of veterans smoking cigarettes daily and drinking heavily in the past month compared with 2.6 percent of

comparable nonveterans (Figure 3).

End Notes

- 1 National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. (2002; revised 2004). *Alcohol: What you don't know could harm you* (NIH Publication No. 99-4323). Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health. Available at http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/WhatUDontKnow_HTML/dontknow.htm
- 2 National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. (1998, January). *Alcohol Alert No. 39: Alcohol and tobacco*. Retrieved September 20, 2005, from <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/aa39.htm>
- 3 Long J. S. (1997). *Regression models for categorical and limited dependent variables* (No. 7, Advanced Quantitative Techniques in the Social Sciences). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Logistic regression models included calendar year and veteran status indicators, and were estimated using the SUDAAN® software's R-LOGISTIC procedure to account for NSDUH's complex survey design.

Figure Notes

Source: SAMHSA, 2003 NSDUH.

* Difference between veterans and comparable nonveterans significant at $p < .05$.

** Difference between veterans and comparable nonveterans significant at $p < .01$.

† Estimates standardized to match veteran demographic distribution by age, gender, and region.

The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) is an annual survey sponsored by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Prior to 2002, this survey was called the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA). The results presented here are based on an analysis of information obtained from 12,072 veterans and 184,339 nonveterans aged 17 or older were surveyed from 2000 through 2003.

The survey collects data by administering questionnaires to a representative sample of the population through face-to-face interviews at their place of residence.

The NSDUH Report is prepared by the Office of Applied Studies (OAS), SAMHSA, and by RTI International in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina. (RTI International is a trade name of Research Triangle Institute.)

Information and data for this issue are based on the following publications:

Office of Applied Studies. (2004). *Results from the 2003 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National findings* (DHHS Publication No. SMA 04-3964, NSDUH Series H-25). Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Office of Applied Studies. (2003). *Results from the 2002 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National findings* (DHHS Publication No. SMA 03-3836, NSDUH Series H-22). Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Office of Applied Studies. (2002). *Results from the 2001 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse: Volume I. Summary of national findings* (DHHS Publication No. SMA 02-3758, NHSDA Series H-17). Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Office of Applied Studies. (2001). *Summary of findings from the 2000 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse* (DHHS Publication No. SMA 01-3549, NHSDA Series H-13). Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Also available online: <http://www.oas.samhsa.gov>

Because of improvements and modifications to the 2002 NSDUH, estimates from the 2002, 2003, and 2004 surveys should not be compared with estimates from the 2001 or earlier versions of the survey to examine changes over time.

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