

Adolescents' swimming under the influence of alcohol – National representative evidence from 27 European countries

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Introduction: According to WHO, drowning is an under-recognised threat to public health and alcohol use a major contributing factor. Unfortunately, cross-cultural evidence is still scarce. This study investigates swimming under the influence of alcohol (SUI) among adolescents, an important precursor of alcohol-related drowning, and factors associated with this behaviour.

Methods: Nationally representative surveys were conducted in 27 countries participating in the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Drugs (ESPAD). Data collected in 2019 and 2024 among 162,404 15-year-olds were combined to avoid outliers due to low prevalence and to include countries that collected the information in either year exclusively. Logistic and linear regression was used to predict SUI prevalence at the individual and country level, respectively.

Results: SUI prevalence ranged from below 1.5% among all adolescents and below 3.0% among swimmers in Faroes Island, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, and Sweden to above 4.0% among all adolescents and 7.0% and higher among swimmers in Austria, Finland, Germany, and Liechtenstein. Denmark had the highest prevalence (13.9% among all adolescents, 17.7% among swimmers). On the individual level, the higher binge drinking frequency, general risk-taking (fight, injury, trouble with police, unwanted/unprotected sex, etc.), and perceived alcohol availability, the higher the odds of SUI. On the country level, only adolescent binge drinking proportion was associated with SUI prevalence but not adolescent risk-taking, population per capita alcohol use, or economic inequality (GINI coefficient).

Discussions and Conclusions: SUI appears to be part of a larger risk-behaviour syndrome in adolescence. Even if prevalence is low in some countries, SUI can have severe consequences, including fatal drowning. Comprehensive and effective prevention and policy approaches are also required because for decades advertisements are exploiting aquatic leisure time fun to promote alcoholic beverages, undermining risk awareness.

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