

# The Days of Wine and Roses: Growing Up with Smokers and Problem Drinkers

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## Abstract

Childhood environment has long lasting direct and indirect consequences on health. This paper focuses on the relationship between health in midlife and two variables of adverse environment in childhood, that is, smokers in the household and the existence of any problem drinker in the family.

**Data:** The data were collected from a group of high school seniors of the Class 1957 in the Wisconsin Longitudinal study. The respondents were interviewed in 1957, 1975, 1992, and 2003. The rich information on family background is one of the strengths of the WLS among all aging data sets. Its longitudinal nature of over 45 years also provides good information of life events and socioeconomic attainment.

**Analysis:** Multivariate analysis (logistic regression and OLS) was used. The dependent variables included self-report health status, disability, total number of diagnosed diseases, total number of somatic symptoms, specific diagnosed diseases, body size (height and BMI), smoking habits, vigorous exercises, mental ability, depression, and other measures of mental health. The main explanatory variables were smokers in the household while growing up; and any problem drinker in the family. They were both asked twice in WLS. The problem drinker question was only administered to a randomly selected subsample of 1957 high school seniors in 1992. The question about smokers was asked to a randomly selected sibling in 1994. However, in 2003, both questions were administered to all interviewed respondents. I mainly used answers from 2003 data to construct the variables and then imputed the missing data by earlier reports. I also controlled for an array of childhood background measures, including parental socioeconomic background (education, occupation, and family income), religion, residential information (rural/ metro), childhood abuse, and parental fertility (number of siblings, parents' ages at birth and at first birth, birth order, and spacing). Other variables, such as high school IQ, high school grades, aspiration, educational attainment, income, occupation, marital history, marital status, and fertility of the respondents, were also entered the full equation.

**Findings:** Growing up with smokers and/or problem drinkers have significant negative influences on physical health at midlife, for example, self-reported status, disability, total number of illness, total number of somatic symptoms, cancer, body size, smoking status, and vigorous exercises. However, their effects on mental ability and measures of mental health are intriguingly positive or, in one case, absent. All effects are independent of other family background measures, and later life events and attainment. A preliminary analysis suggests that intergenerational transmission of health environment is a probable mechanism. An advanced analysis will be followed.