An individual younger than 15 years of age who begins drinking alcohol is four times more likely to become an alcoholic than a person who begins drinking at age 21, National Institutes of Health researchers reported yesterday at a press conference at the National Press Club.

In the first study to link the early onset of drinking with the potential for future alcohol abuse, Dr. Bridget F. Grant and colleagues conducted face-to-face interviews with 27,616 current and former drinkers who participated in the 1992 National Longitudinal Alcohol Epidemiologic Survey. The NLAES study includes 42,862 adults aged at least 18 years.

Dr. Grant found that more than 40% of the 27,616 participants who began drinking before they were 15 were dependent on alcohol at some point in their lives compared with 24.5% who did not begin drinking until they were 17, and 10% who did not begin drinking until they were 21 or 22. Among those who did not begin drinking until they were aged 25 years or older, only 2.5% were classified as alcohol abusers.

The likelihood of alcohol dependence was reduced by 14% for each year that drinking was delayed, Dr. Grant said. The likelihood of lifetime alcohol abuse declined by 8% for each year that drinking was delayed, she added.

There are three possibilities for such results, NIH's Dr. Enoch Gordis told meeting attendees. First, from a social standpoint, the later a person starts drinking, the less time the person has to establish a drinking habit before certain protective social measures kick in, such as a first job or a marriage. Second, a person who starts drinking at a younger age may be more vulnerable to peer pressure, advertising and other influences. And third, the young brain at age 11 or 12 may be biologically more susceptible to alcohol addiction due to hormonal and other physical changes, Dr. Gordis said.

The effect of the onset of drinking at a young age impacts people almost equally whether or not there is a family history of alcoholism., NIH researchers discovered.
Overall, the early onset of alcohol use has both short- and long-term consequences for public health, Dr. Grant told conference participants. In the short-term, among adolescents and young adults, early drinking is associated with a high incidence of injuries and death from motor vehicle accidents, high-risk sexual behavior, exposure to HIV, pregnancy, violence, serious depression and suicide.

"In the long-term, the early onset of drinking leads to the abuse of other drugs," Dr. Grant said.

Results of the NIH study are published in the January issue of the Journal of Substance Abuse.