College freshman, relishing newfound freedom away from home, are at greatest risk of alcohol-related harm during their first few weeks of school, according to an expert at Penn State's Prevention Research Center.

"We see a spike then because anxiety is high, and the rigors of coursework haven't yet taken hold," Michael Cleveland told the Orlando Sentinel.

New college students often are not aware that excessive drinking can lead to fatal alcohol poisoning, as well as accidents, assault, date rape, violence and academic failure, the article notes.

A study conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health found 44 percent of college students binge drink, and many suffer alcohol-induced blackouts.

Every year, college drinking leads to 1,825 deaths among students age 18 to 24, according to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

Drinking also contributes to 599,000 injuries, 696,000 assaults and 97,000 cases of date rape on college campuses annually.

A study published last year in the journal Addictive Behaviors, which included 77,000 incoming freshmen, found students drank more in the fall than in the summer, and also drank more alcohol in a shorter period of time. "Once college starts, students who do drink get less careful about pacing themselves," said study author Scott Walters.

Penn State's Cleveland published a study earlier this year that found a program that uses parents and peers to help prevent college freshmen from becoming or staying heavy drinkers shows promise.

The researchers studied two sets of interventions, one using parents and one using peers. They found that students who did not drink before starting college, and who received the parent-based intervention, were unlikely to become heavy drinkers in the first semester.

Students who drank heavily the summer before starting college were more likely to cut down on drinking if they received intervention either from parents or peers. If they received both interventions, there was no effect.

To learn more about Underage and College Drinking, click here.