

Alcohol and Drug Problem Overview



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The abuse of alcohol and other drugs—including prescription drugs—is common and costly. It can cause or worsen many medical problems and if left untreated can destroy families and lives. Frequent abuse of alcohol and other drugs can lead to addiction, a disease that affects the brain and behavior. Some people are more vulnerable to developing a problem with alcohol or other drugs. These populations include:

Individuals who begin drinking or using drugs at an early age.

- 90 percent of all adults with a substance use disorder started using under the age of 18 and half under the age of 15.
- Children who first smoke marijuana under the age of 14 are more than five times as likely to abuse drugs as adults than those who first use marijuana at age 18.

Individuals with a family history of substance abuse problems.

- The children of alcoholics are four times more likely to develop problems with alcohol.

Individuals with a mental illness such as depression, anxiety or bipolar disorder.

- In 2002, 4 million adults met the criteria for both serious mental illness and a substance use disorder.
- 60 to 80 percent of adolescents with substance use disorders have a co-occurring mental illness.

Alcohol Problems

- Alcohol abuse is a leading preventable cause of death in the US, accounting for 75,000 deaths each year.
- The annual cost of alcohol abuse is approximately \$191.6 billion.
- Among teens, alcohol is the most commonly abused drug.

- More than half (57 percent) of 12th graders and nearly a fifth (17 percent) of 8th graders report having been drunk at least once in their lives.
- In addition a quarter (25 percent) of 12th graders report binge drinking (five or more drinks in a row in the last 2 weeks).
- Youth alcohol abuse costs the nation \$89.5 billion annually.
- Among youth, the use of alcohol and other drugs has also been linked to unintentional injuries, physical fights, academic and occupational problems, and illegal behavior.
- Every year, 5,000 young people die as a result of underage drinking.

Prescription and Illicit Drug Problems

Drug abuse is a serious public health problem in the US, costing the nation approximately \$151.4 billion annually. Drug abuse includes the use of illegal drugs such as marijuana, cocaine, heroin, and other “street drugs”; and the misuse and abuse of prescription and over-the-counter medications.

The rate of drug abuse among adolescents remains unacceptable high and is associated with other risky behaviors including drunk and drugged driving, risky sexual behavior, academic failure, and involvement with the criminal justice system. For example:

- In 2006, 30 percent of high school seniors reported driving after drinking heavily or using drugs, or riding in a car whose driver had been drinking heavily or using drugs.
- 24 percent of 15- to 17- year olds and 31 percent of 18- to 24- year olds say they have done more sexually than planned because they had been drinking or using drugs. And, 12 percent of 15- to 17- year olds

and 25 percent of 18- to 24- year olds reported having unprotected sex because they were using drugs or drinking.

- High school students who use alcohol or other drugs are up to five times more likely to drop out of school.
- As many as four in five teens in trouble with the law are abusing drugs and alcohol. And, 60 to 90 percent of teenagers who appear in juvenile court have a substance abuse problem. Eight out of 10 (78 percent) 9th-12th-graders report teens use drugs “to deal with the pressures and stress of school.”^{xix}
- Two out of five (39 percent) 9th-12th graders agree that “prescription drugs (even without a doctor’s prescription) are much safer to use than illegal drugs.”^{xx}
- In 2008 almost a million (887,000) 12- to 17- year olds abused a prescription drug for the first time.^{xxi}

Summary

Clearly the abuse of alcohol and other drugs by adolescents is a major public health problem despite lower rates of use over the past ten years. In fact, declines have recently tapered off—particularly among 8th graders—and adolescents are less likely to perceive the use of certain drugs as risky.

The University of Michigan’s Monitoring the Future study reveals that risk attitudes among 8th, 10th, and 12th graders are softening towards marijuana, inhalants and Ecstasy and there has been a slight increase in marijuana use among 8th, 10th, and 12th graders. Softening of risk attitudes generally precedes an increase in drug use by two years.

The Monitoring the Future researchers express a concern that there may be a reversal in adolescent alcohol and drug use:

Marijuana: “Not only is [marijuana] use rising, but a key

belief about the degree of risk associated with marijuana use has been in decline among young people even longer, and the degree to which teens disapprove of use of the drug has recently begun to decline. Changes in these beliefs and attitudes are often very influential in driving changes in use.”

Ecstasy: “The proportion of young people who see ‘great risk’ associated with trying Ecstasy has fallen appreciably and steadily since 2004.” The lead researcher cautions that “given the glamorous name and reputation of [Ecstasy], I could easily imagine it making a comeback as younger children entering their teens become increasingly unaware of its risks.”

Inhalants: Since 2001, there have been declines in 8th and 10th graders belief that abusing household products, like nail polish remover, cleaning fluids, hair spray, gasoline, and cooking spray to get high is dangerous. Historical drug data show that when perception of danger or risk decreases there is often a corresponding increase in drug abuse.

Solutions

Parents are the most effective force in preventing and reducing adolescent risky behaviors and helping our nation’s youth lead healthy drug free lives. Research shows that kids who learn about the dangers of drugs at home are up to 50 percent less likely to use drugs than kids who don’t learn about these dangers from their parents. xxiii

To help parents in preventing and reducing adolescent alcohol and drug use, The Partnership at Drugfree.org provides information and tools through its website, its community education programs, and its public service messages.

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