

Illegal Drug Use Down, but Prescription Abuse Up

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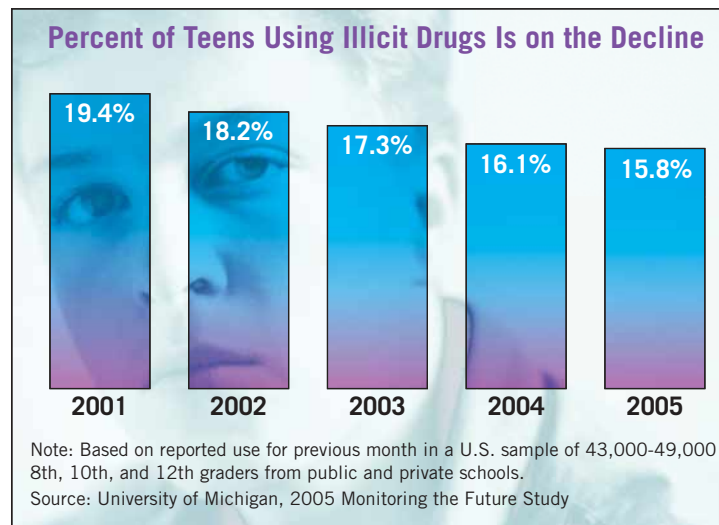
WASHINGTON — Use of illegal drugs among adolescents continues to decline modestly, but abuse of some prescription drugs is increasing, according to a survey of 49,000 students in 400 secondary schools nationwide.

Overall, the use of any illicit drug in the past 12 months is down by more than a third since 1996 among eighth graders and by just under a quarter among 10th graders, according to the survey. The decline is smaller among 12th graders—about 10%.

“Today is another great day for America’s teens, it’s a really bad day for the drug traffickers trading on them, and it’s a particularly bad day for those who falsely claim we are losing the battle against drugs,” Karen P. Tandy, administrator of the Drug Enforcement Administration, said at a press briefing on the survey sponsored by the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

Principal investigator Lloyd Johnston, Ph.D., noted that although declines in illicit drug use among 10th and 12th graders were not dramatic this year, “they are dramatic over a long period of time. Their use of marijuana and illicit drugs other than marijuana is down for the fourth year in a row.”

Overall, “several specific drugs showed declines this year which were statistically significant in one or more grades: those include amphetamines—including methamphetamines—steroids, and alcohol,” said Dr. Johnston, who is a distinguished senior research scientist at the University of Michigan’s Institute for Social Research, in Ann Arbor. “The drop in methamphetamine use would seem to defy conventional wisdom because we’ve heard so



much about the meth epidemic spreading. I don’t want to say that it’s not, but it’s certainly not spreading among secondary school students.”

But all the news is not rosy, especially when it comes to abuse of prescription medications. For instance, nonmedical use of OxyContin by 12th graders in the past year rose from 4% in 2002 to 5.5% in 2005, a statistically significant difference. The increase “is something I think we need to deal with,” Dr. Johnston said.

The nonmedical use of Vicodin among 12th graders rose slightly from last year—to 9.5% from 9.3%—but was down from 10.5% in 2003.

NIDA director Dr. Nora D. Volkow speculated on where teens might be getting prescription drugs.

“Kids can get it directly from a Web site; you just need a credit card,” she said. “But there are also people who may be buying it in larger [quantities] and then distributing it. And then there are those patients who may be going to different physicians asking for prescription medications, and then those [drugs] are diverted,” said Dr.

Volkow.

The vast majority of prescription drug abuse is probably not starting out from home, said John P. Walters, director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy. “When you see levels of Vicodin use of 1 in 10 high school seniors, I don’t believe they’re

[stealing] them out of their parents’ medicine cabinet. No doubt there is some of that, but the quantities we’re talking about are not sustainable with simply pulling ... one or two pills out of a bottle. We also have detected organized criminal groups that are providing pills out of the drug supply they produce.”

And the decline in overall drug use may be leveling off, judging by what trends are occurring among eighth graders, Dr. Johnston said.

“Eighth graders were first to show increase in drug use in the early 1990s, and they gave us an early warning that problems were about to emerge. They were also the first to show the beginning of a turnaround in drug use in the mid-1990s. Now they appear to be first to possibly signal an end of decline in mid-2000s, in that their cigarette use did not decline this year, their use of marijuana did not decline, and their use of illicit drugs other than marijuana did not decline. This is a divergence from other grades.”

The study also looked at perceived availability of various illicit drugs. Amyl nitrite

and butyl nitrite were among those judged hardest to get, with only 19% of 12th graders saying they would be “easy” or “fairly easy” to acquire.

At the other end of the spectrum, 85% of 12th graders said marijuana would be easy or fairly easy to get, a percentage that has remained relatively constant for the entire 30 years of the survey.

The fact that the marijuana number has remained relatively unchanged “just shows that the war on drugs is failing and we need another way,” Aaron Houston, director of government relations for the Marijuana Policy Project, said in an interview after he had listened to the briefing. “Our current policy guarantees that marijuana will be available to young adults because it keeps it in the black market. If we were to control and regulate marijuana and bring it out of the black market, we might be able to control it like we have tobacco.”

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New Electronic Drug Labels

The Food and Drug Administration has begun requiring drug manufacturers to submit prescription drug label information in a new electronic format. The new labels are the key element and primary source of medication information for “DailyMed,” a new interagency online health information clearinghouse that provides the most up-to-date medication information free to consumers, physicians, and others. For more information, visit <http://daily.med.nlm.nih.gov>.

Autism Resource Launched

The nonprofit organization Autism Speaks has launched a new Web site, offering resources for those directly affected by the disorder. The site offers information for two different audiences: families who want to learn more about autism and people who would like to become involved with the autism community. To access the site, visit www.autismspeaks.org.

Campaign Targets Childhood Obesity

The Department of Health and Human Services and the Advertising Council have

launched a campaign, “Can Your Food Do That?” to encourage healthy eating and physical activity among children. Along with television and Web ads, the campaign includes the “kids” section of the Web site, www.smallstep.gov. The interactive Web site features online games, Web links, and tools for healthy eating and increased exercise.

Resources for Pediatric GERD

GlaxoSmithKline has launched a pediatric gastroesophageal reflux disease awareness initiative that includes a tool for recording a child’s symptoms and an educational Web site. The Reflux Recorder can be obtained by visiting www.babygerd.com. The site also provides information about symptoms, potential condition complications if untreated, and treatment options. The company manufactures an over-the-counter drug for the condition.

Comparing Health Plans

The National Committee for Quality Assurance has added summary comparative scores to its online “Living with Illness” reports, to help users better compare how

health plans help patients manage diabetes, cardiac care, asthma, and mental illness. To see a sample report, visit www.healthchoices.org and conduct a search using the “See How Your Health Plan Rates” feature.

HPV and Cancer Guide

The Association of Reproductive Health Professionals has released “A Woman’s Guide to Understanding HPV and Cervical Cancer.” The guide can be downloaded by visiting www.arhp.org/womansguide/hpv_en (English) or www.arhp.org/womansguide/hpv_sp (Spanish).

Dietary Guidelines Explained

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has released “A Healthier You.” It is based on the “Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2005” and is intended to help Americans interpret the newest dietary and physical activity recommendations. The book offers simple steps for healthy living, drawn from advice contained in the guidelines. The book is available for purchase (\$12.95) from the Government Printing Office by visiting www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines/dga2005/healthieryou/.