

Keeping a Clear Mind

FINDINGS ON USE OF ILLEGAL DRUGS

From the March 2010 Youth Risk Behavior Survey
Arlington, Virginia

The choices that young people make today have a big impact on their health and well-being, now and in the future.

The Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) asks young people about the behaviors and habits with the strongest links to their health.

This brochure takes a quick look at the findings on use of illegal drugs from Arlington's March 2010 survey of middle and high school students.

WHY WORRY?

Young people today are exposed to a variety of potentially harmful and potentially addictive illegal drugs. These substances include steroids, marijuana, depressants such as barbiturates, hallucinogens such as LSD, stimulants like ecstasy and cocaine, as well as inhalants.

[Marijuana] had me in another state of mind; I was relaxed. All my problems seemed like they were disappearing.

Alby P., age 19

(From Heads Up: Real News About Drugs, Scholastic and National Institute on Drug Abuse)

These substances have a wide range of potentially damaging effects on the health of young people. For example,

- Use of marijuana has been associated with slowed thinking and reaction time and long term use may lead to impaired learning and memory problems.
- Use of inhalants can cause headache, nausea, or vomiting, unconsciousness and even sudden death.
- Steroid use by teenagers may halt growth prematurely and permanently worsen acne and induce high blood pressure and jaundice.

ABUSE AND ADDICTION

Despite the dangers, young people continue to use illegal drugs because they like the way these substances make them feel. All addictive drugs affect the "reward system" in the brain. When functioning properly, this system reinforces healthy behaviors needed for survival (like eating) by associating the behaviors with intense feelings of pleasure.

HOW WE DID THE SURVEY

These findings are based on a survey of about 2850 students enrolled in grades six, eight, ten and twelve in Arlington's public secondary schools. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Parents had an opportunity to opt out their child. Only one percent did. Eighty-six percent of students in the classes chosen for the survey filled out a questionnaire. Most of those who did not were absent from school.

All potentially addictive drugs affect some aspect of this system – except that the pleasurable sensations are associated with the *drug*. As a result, the *prolonged use* of addictive substances will lead to addiction. A person who is dependent or addicted to a drug feels compelled to have it despite serious health, emotional, legal or social consequences. Eventually, most addicts develop a *tolerance* or the need for increasing amounts of the drug to get the same effect.

USE OF DRUGS AMONG TEENS

Among Arlington youth, the most commonly abused illegal substances are marijuana, inhalants and steroids.

- Among high school seniors, nearly half have tried marijuana and about one in four are current users (i.e. had used in the past month.)
- Among 6th grade students, more than one in ten have used inhalants and one in 20 are current users.
- Two to three percent of high school students have used steroids illegally and four to five percent have tried ecstasy at least once.
- About 8 to 9 percent of high school students report using “other” illegal drugs (i.e. LSD, cocaine, speed, heroin)

TRENDS IN DRUG USE

- Overall, the percentage of youth who have ever tried marijuana has dropped from 25 percent in 2004 to 21 percent in 2010.
- Lifetime inhalant use fell from 13 percent of youth in 2004 to 10 percent in 2010 (with no change since 2007).
- The percent of high school students offered or sold drugs at school decreased from 16 percent in 2004 to 12 percent in 2010.

WHO'S AT RISK?

Illegal drug use can affect any teen – including star athletes and “A” students. But some adolescents may be at particular risk:

- Marijuana use increases steadily by grade, with boys more likely than girls to have ever tried or currently use pot.
- Inhalant use peaks in middle school, with girls slightly more likely than boys to have tried and be current users of inhalants.

OTC AND PRESCRIPTION DRUG ABUSE

About 10 percent of 8th, 10th, and 12th graders report having abused over the counter (OTC) and prescription drugs. Such abuse is a relatively new threat to the health of young people. Young people choose OTC drugs because they are legal, cheap, widely and easily available, and are seen as harmless. These drugs can be found right in the medicine cabinets at home. But there are serious dangers associated with using OTC drugs in quantities far beyond recommended levels or prescription drugs without medical supervision, especially if used with other drugs or alcohol.

FOR THE COMMUNITY

What principles should guide community efforts to prevent drug abuse by our youth? The National Institute on Drug Abuse suggests that prevention programs should:

- Be long-term with repeated “boosters.” The benefits of even the best programs diminish without follow-up.
- Use interactive techniques, such as peer discussion and role-playing.
- As early as elementary school, address risk factors such as aggressive behavior, poor social skills, and academic failure.

FOR PARENTS

- Parental supervision and monitoring are critical to preventing drug abuse. All children, including teens, need family support, role models, and moderate, consistent discipline.
- Know the signs of drug abuse among teens, including sudden changes in personality, academic problems, lack of interest in personal appearance, and secretiveness.
- Seek a professional assessment for any child for whom you are concerned may have crossed the line into addiction. Remember that denial is a hallmark of addiction, so users are unlikely to get help on their own or admit the true extent of their use.
- Teens with a diagnosable mental health problem (up to half of those who abuse drugs) need treatment programs designed to meet their specific needs.

TO LEARN MORE

To learn more about the effects of different drugs, the signs of use, symptoms of addiction, and for help in getting effective treatment, go to these web sites:

- *Understanding Drug Abuse and Addiction* (National Institute on Drug Abuse) at www.nida.nih.gov/Infofacts/understand.html
- *Talking To Your Child About Drugs* (The Nemours Foundation) at www.kidshealth.org/parent/positive/talk/talk_about_drugs.html
- *Dual Diagnosis in Adolescence* (National Alliance on Mental Illness) at www.nami.org/Content/ContentGroups/Hotline1/Dual_Diagnosis_in_Adolescence.htm
- *Prescription Medicine Abuse: A Serious Problem* (Partnership for A Drug-Free America) at www.drugfree.org/Portal/DrugIssue/Features/Prescription_Medicine_Misuse
- *Prescription for Danger: A Report on Prescription and Over-the-Counter Drug Abuse Among the Nation's Teens* (Office of National Drug Control Policy) at www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/drugfact/prescriptn_drugs/index.html



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