



Substance abuse is a major public health problem that puts millions of adolescents at increased risk for alcohol-related and drug-related traffic accidents, risky sexual practices, poor academic performance, juvenile delinquency, and developmental problems. Although several national surveys indicate that teen use of most illicit drugs has held steady during the past few years, adolescent drug abuse remains alarmingly high. Moreover, use of the dangerous club drug MDMA (Ecstasy) appears to be increasing among older teens. Below are important facts to know about substance abuse, addiction, treatment, and recovery among adolescents.

Substance Abuse and Adolescents

➤ *Alcohol and Illicit Drug Use*

Among youth age 12 to 17, an estimated 1.1 million meet the diagnostic criteria for dependence on illicit drugs, and 915,000 are dependent on alcohol.¹

More than half (55 percent) of our nation's 12th graders have tried an illicit drug, and more than one-quarter (29 percent) have tried a drug other than marijuana, such as cocaine, inhalants, and heroin.²

Youth age 16 to 17 have the second highest rate (16.4 percent) of current illicit drug use in the country. The highest rate (19.9 percent) is found among young people age 18 to 20.¹

Although consumption of alcoholic beverages is illegal for people under 21 years of age, 10.4 million current drinkers are age 12 to 20. Of this group, nearly half (5.1 million) engage in binge drinking, including 2.3 million who would also be classified as heavy drinkers.¹

About one-quarter of youth age 10 to 17 say their friends "huff" (inhale the fumes of household products such as glue and paint), and more than one-third (34 percent) of these youth are between age 13 and 15 when they are first exposed to peers who use inhalants.³

In 1998, nearly 10 percent of adolescents (age 12 to 17) reported using an illicit drug at least once during the past month. About 1 in 12 youth (8.3 percent) in this age group are current (past month) users of marijuana, the most frequently used illicit drug, and 19.1 percent are current users of alcohol.¹

➤ *Attitudes Toward Alcohol and Illicit Drug Use*

About half (54 percent) of youth age 12 to 17 perceive a great risk in smoking marijuana once or twice a week or using cocaine once a month.¹



Among 12th graders, less than two-thirds (62.5 percent) disapprove or strongly disapprove of smoking marijuana occasionally.⁴

Among adolescents age 12 to 17, less than half (47 percent) perceive a great risk in having five or more drinks once or twice a week; two-thirds (66.4) perceive such risk in having four or five drinks nearly every day.¹

About 40 percent of teens age 13 to 18 strongly agree that “really cool” teens do not use drugs.⁵

Nearly one in four teens age 12 to 17 cite drugs as the most important problem facing people their age.⁶

➤ *Availability of Alcohol and Illicit Drugs*

In 1998, 56 percent of youth age 12 to 17 reported that marijuana is easy or fairly easy to obtain. Other illicit drugs that are perceived as easy or fairly easy to obtain include cocaine (reported by 30 percent of these youth), crack (29 percent), and heroin (21 percent).¹

In 1999, alcohol was reported fairly easy or very easy to get by 72.3 percent of 8th graders and 88.2 percent of 10th graders.⁷

Nearly 14 percent of youth age 12 to 17 reported being approached by someone selling illicit drugs during the 30 days prior to their interview for a 1998 survey.¹

By the time they reach age 17, more than half (56 percent) of adolescents know a drug dealer.⁶

Addiction as a Medical Disorder

- Addiction is a chronic disease involving a number of brain chemistry disorders.⁸
- Children of substance abusing parents are at increased risk for substance abuse and related problems because of both genetic and environmental factors.^{9,10}
- Changes in brain chemistry over time make it difficult for persons with addictive disorders to stop using drugs or alcohol despite their wish to do so.⁸ Lapses in the prescribed treatment therapy also can interfere with a person's ability to stop using drugs or alcohol.