

Teens and Drugs: Rite of Passage or Recipe for Addiction?

Adapted from Alice Park, for TIME

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In a new report on drug, alcohol and tobacco use among teens in the U.S., the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University finds that 75% of all high school students have used alcohol, tobacco or either legal or illicit drugs and that 20% of these adolescents are addicted.



The data also support previous studies that link early substance use to addiction later in life: 90% of Americans who are currently addicted started smoking, drinking or using drugs before age 18. A quarter of those who begin using addictive substances at these early ages become addicted as adults, while only one in 25 who start using these substances after age 21 does.

“What this data show[s] is that any adolescent is at risk of using substances, and that it’s preventable,” says Dr. Leslie Walker, president of the Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine chief of adolescent medicine at the University of Washington.

Susan Foster, director of policy research at CASA, says the data highlight the fact that it’s not just substance abuse that is potentially harmful to developing teens, but any substance use at all. “[T]he earlier we start to use, the greater the risk of becoming addicted. Adolescence is the critical period for starting to use drugs and acquiring addictions, [because] the part of the brain that is responsible for judgment, decision-making and impulse control isn’t completely developed. And because the teen brain isn’t completely developed, it’s more sensitive to the impact and damaging consequences of drugs. The drugs increase the chance that kids will take risks and have impaired judgment, and that in turn impairs development and increases the risk of addiction.”

While that’s true, it’s worth noting that some kids are more likely to use drugs than others, namely those who have addicted or abusive parents, are vulnerable to mental health problems, or have experienced some kind of trauma. Early drug use can itself increase risk of addiction later on, but the major increases in risk are due to abuse, trauma and predisposition to mental illness — all factors that may contribute to the risk of early drug use.

While alcohol use among teens has started to drop slightly between 2009 and 2010, misuse of prescription drugs such as Oxycontin and medications for ADHD continues to climb.

“Overall we haven’t made a huge impact on the number of kids who try something during their teens,” says Walker. And that’s why the report focused on collecting data on all aspects of substance abuse to provide doctors and parents with a more complete picture of the problem. “We need to address substance abuse more globally.”

Whether you have personally used drugs, alcohol, or cigarettes, or just know someone who has, you have some perspective to share. What are your personal experiences with drugs? What do you think about teen drug use? (Your answer can be completely anonymous or confidential.)