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Teen Drug and Alcohol Use Linked to Mental Health Distress

By Matt Richtel

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Substance use by adolescents may prove valuable in identifying the presence of underlying disorders, a new study suggests.

The News

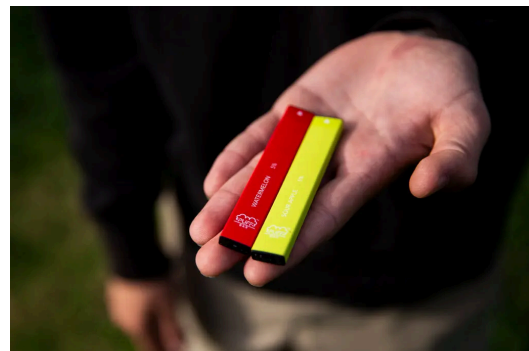
Teenagers who use cannabis, alcohol and nicotine are more likely to have underlying psychiatric symptoms, and worse symptoms, than their peers who are not regularly using substances, new research has found.

The research, [published Monday in JAMA Pediatrics](#), found that such substances are

linked to an array of symptoms and conditions, including anxiety, depression, hyperactivity and suicidal ideation. These findings suggest that asking adolescents about substance use may provide a powerful screening tool when looking for underlying mental health issues, researchers said.

“Universally screening for psychiatric symptoms in the context of all types of substance use is what we think might be most important,” said Brenden Tervo-Clemmens, assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of Minnesota and lead author of the paper.

“All the symptoms of mental health we examined, be it depression, suicidal thoughts, ADHD, were elevated no matter what the substance was,” he added.



The study's authors found that some adolescents may be using substances to self-medicate while also experiencing worsening

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symptoms through such use. Credit: Jenna Schoenefeld for
The New York Times

The Findings: Drug Use as Self-Medication

The paper found that the link between substance use and mental health existed even at low levels of drug and alcohol use. Dr. Tervo-Clemmens said that adolescents with low levels of substance use may be self-medicating and that their relatively modest substance use was not likely to be causing the underlying mental health challenges.

But the research also found that the most frequent and intensive users of the substances experienced the most severe mental health symptoms. In these instances, Dr. Tervo-Clemmens said, the adolescents may be worsening their symptoms even as they use substances to self-medicate.

Specifically, the study found that daily or near-daily use — but not weekly or monthly use — of substances was linked to a moderate increase in symptoms. Researchers described the connection as “dose dependent,” because the level of use was linked to the intensity of symptoms.

Background: Two Strong Data Sets

The strength of the study came from its use of two data sets that yielded similar findings.

One sample used survey data from 15,600 Massachusetts high school students with a median age of around 16. The second sample drew on similarly self-reported data from 17,000 respondents to the national Youth Risk Behavior Survey.

In both groups, the study’s authors noted, “alcohol, cannabis and nicotine use each had significant, moderate dose-dependent associations with worse psychiatric symptoms, including suicidal thoughts.”

Another key finding was that the link was present between multiple symptoms and between multiple substances. “It’s not just cannabis, it’s not just alcohol, it’s not just nicotine,” Dr. Tervo-Clemmens said. “It seems to be no matter the substance.”

What’s New: A Generational Change

Compared with prior generations, today’s adolescents are experiencing more mental

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health symptoms but a declining use of drugs and alcohol. Binge-drinking and cigarette smoking, in particular, have fallen sharply, affecting a smaller portion of the adolescent population.

These broad trends may support the idea that asking teenagers about substance use could be a way to screen for mental health challenges, Dr. Tervo-Clemmens said. That's because the group of regular substance users is smaller than it once was and may be more closely linked to individuals who are self-medicating or otherwise dealing with mental health challenges.

[Source](#)

What parents should know about teen drug and alcohol use

How families can help prevent teen substance use disorder

Original Article: Michigan Health Lab(link is external)

If you or someone you know is in immediate need of help for substance use, or any mental health crisis, the national 988 Lifeline is the best place to start. You can call or text 988

from any phone, or connect via webchat(link is external).

Recent studies, both nationally and at Michigan Medicine, report that alcohol, cannabis and nicotine vaping are the most commonly used substances among teens.

Aside from cannabis and prescription drug misuse, teens report relatively low use of illicit substances. Despite this, teen drug overdose deaths have been on the rise in recent years. Monthly overdose deaths among youth aged 10-19 more than doubled from 2019 to 2021.

Parents and caregivers should actively be on the lookout for signs and symptoms of substance use. Addressing substance use early on can help prevent addiction or other problems later in life.

An expert from the University of Michigan Addiction Center recently spoke about the impacts of teen substance use and what families can do to help youth who may be at risk or showing signs of addiction.

Trends in teen substance use

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Meghan Martz, Ph.D., a research assistant professor of psychiatry, explains concerning trends surrounding adolescent substance use. Although levels have stabilized in recent years, there are new factors for parents to consider.

When it comes to alcohol use, binge drinking remains the leading concern. This harmful consumption pattern can lead to blackouts, vomiting, overdose and mental and physical health problems.

Vaping nicotine products also remains popular among teens. Martz says the flavored products cater directly to its young audience, posing a serious risk of addiction for adolescents.

As cannabis legalization has become widespread, perceptions of harm have decreased, and rates of cannabis use have increased tremendously. In 2023, 29% of 12th graders reported cannabis use in the past year.

“The level of THC is much stronger in cannabis products used today, and there is a direct link between higher potency and risk for disordered use,” Martz said, describing the substance in

cannabis that causes most of the “high” sensation that users feel.

Parents should particularly monitor for opioids, even if the use rates are lower than other substances. Due to drugs laced with fentanyl, a highly potent synthetic opioid, there has been a recent surge in overdose deaths.

Risk factors

The exact reasons for substance use can vary, “but teens are the most vulnerable population for disordered use,” Martz said.

It all starts with a curiosity about substances. Ten percent of 9- and 10-year-olds reported curiosity to use alcohol and nicotine, according to research Martz led. The desire to fit in socially can significantly influence the decision to try substances, and teens tend to overestimate the prevalence of substance use among their peers.

Factors that can lead to substance use in teens include:

- A family history of substance use.
- Associating with substance-using peers.

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- Coping with mental health issues like anxiety, depression or ADHD.
- Low parental monitoring.
- Lack of school connectedness.

The adolescent brain

It's important to remember that "the risk factors present in teens are associated with the development of the adolescent brain," said Martz.

Three key functions of the brain are associated with substance use: reward, emotion and cognitive control.

The reward circuit involves the release of dopamine, a naturally occurring chemical attributed to feelings of pleasure. People become hooked to this false sense of happiness and develop an addiction to the drug supplying it.

Similarly, drugs can influence the emotion circuit by reducing feelings of anxiety, irritability and unease. The addiction is reinforced through a cycle of withdrawal symptoms that can range from mild discomfort to life-threatening complications.

But for adolescents, it is the cognitive control circuit that makes them most susceptible to substance use. This brain function is responsible for thinking, planning and problem solving.

"The cognitive control circuit is the last part of the brain to mature," Martz said.

"This makes youth more prone to act on impulse and engage in risky behaviors, including substance use."

Teens are also less likely to experience immediate consequences of substance use – such as hangovers – leading to greater consumption and more damaging neurotoxic effects.

Advice for families

Substance use and addiction prevention starts in the home. Parents are the first line of defense against potential drug use disorders.

There is no guarantee that your child won't use substances, but it is less likely to happen if you:

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- Bring it up early – kids are curious from a young age.
- Talk early and often about the dangers of substance use.
- Set rules about substance use.
- Focus on the biological impact to the brain and body, rather than moral or legal considerations.

“As a parent, you may not be able to control the external influences, but you can certainly start the conversation early and set firm boundaries to protect your child from substance use,” Martz said.

[Source](#)

Hutchinson Health Outpatient Mental Health Use Services Awarded

Grant Amount \$6,975.00

Hutchinson Health Foundation Director
Rachael Gemuenden

This grant will fund Licensed Alcohol and Drug Counselors (LADCs) to provide in-school substance use services at Hutchinson Middle and High Schools. The counselors will offer one-on-one screening, assessment, and

interventions to students at risk for substance abuse, addressing the increasing issues of students arriving under the influence or possessing drug paraphernalia during school hours. The goal is to offer early intervention, increase awareness, and provide education to prevent more serious consequences.

The need for these services arose after the Hutchinson School District expressed concerns about escalating substance-related problems among students. The school has struggled with suspensions alone, as they often do not resolve the underlying issues. By having LADCs available on-site, the grant will help ensure that students receive timely and accessible support, increasing their chances of overcoming substance use challenges.