

Smoking, ecstasy use declining among teens

Health officials say user rate still remains too high

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WASHINGTON — Smoking is declining sharply among American teens, a finding that health experts are hailing as good news for the public's future health.

A report also disclosed that recent sharp increases in the use of ecstasy are slowing, heroin use is down, notably among 10th and 12th graders, and a gradual decline in use of inhalants continued in 2001.

Decreases in cigarette smoking were observed for the eighth-, 10th- and 12th-graders surveyed.

For eighth-graders: Some 12.2 percent reported smoking in the 30 days before they were surveyed, down from 14.6 percent the year before. The peak in the 1990s was 21.0 percent in 1996.

For 10th-graders: The survey found 21.3 percent had smoked in the last 30 days, down from 23.9 percent the year before and a high of 30.4 percent, also in 1996.

For 12th-graders: 29.5 percent of had smoked in the month before being asked. That was down from 31.4 percent in 2000. Their peak in the 1990s came in 1997 at 36.5 percent.

"These important declines in teen smoking did not just happen by chance," said Lloyd Johnston of the University of Michigan. "A lot of individuals and organizations have been making concerted efforts to bring down the unacceptably high rates of smoking among our youth."

The findings were reported yesterday in the annual Monitoring the Future survey conducted for the government by the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research. The report surveyed 44,300 students nationwide in grades 8, 10, and 12.

"Because the teen years are critical in the initiation of nearly all lifetime smoking habits, what happens during that developmental period is vital to the eventual health and longevity of each generation," said Johnston.

The decline in drug use was also lauded by public health officials.

"Overall, drug use among America's teen-agers has remained level or declined for the fifth year in a row, and that's good news. But we must remain vigilant to the threats that heroin, ecstasy, marijuana, alcohol and other dangerous drugs pose to our youth," Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson said in a statement.

Glen Hanson, acting director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, added: "We hope that our concerted effort to give adolescents science-based information about the health risks of ecstasy and other drugs will contribute to a further reduction in the use of these drugs."

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John Walters, director of National Drug Control Policy, characterized the findings as "good news-bad news."

The explosive increases in drug use seen in the early 1990s have stopped, he said, but still too many people use illegal drugs.

"It's time to make the anti-drug effort catch up to the anti-tobacco effort," he said.

Alcohol remains the most popular drug with teens, though a slight reduction was reported in 2001.

Some 79.7 percent of 12th-graders said they had used alcohol at some point, down from 80.3 percent the year before. But the share who admitted to having been drunk at some time rose from 62.3 percent to 63.9 percent.

For 10th-graders, 70.1 percent admitted some alcohol use, down from 71.4 percent. The share who said they had been drunk fell from 49.3 percent to 48.2 percent.

And for eighth-graders, 50.5 percent had had a drink, down from 51.7 percent, and those who had been drunk declined from 25.1 percent to 23.4 percent.

The survey covered students in 424 public and private schools in the 48 contiguous states.

Among other survey findings:

■ Marijuana: 49.0 percent of 12th-graders had used it at some time, up from 48.8 percent the year before; 10th grade, 40.1 percent, down from 40.3; eighth grade, 20.4 percent, up from 20.3.

■ Inhalants: 12th grade, 13.0 percent, down from 14.2; 10th grade, 15.2 percent, down from 16.6; eighth grade, 17.1 percent, down from 17.9.

■ Hallucinogens: 12th grade, 12.8 percent, down from 13.0; 10th grade, 7.8 percent, down from 8.9; eighth grade, 4.0 percent, down from 4.6.

■ LSD: 12th grade, 10.9 percent, down from 11.1; 10th grade, 6.3 percent, down from 7.6; eighth grade, 3.4 percent, down from 3.9.

■ Cocaine: 12th grade, 8.2 percent, down from 8.6; 10th grade, 5.7 percent, down from 6.9; eighth grade, 4.3 percent, down from 4.5.

■ Heroin: 12th grade, 1.8 percent, down from 2.4; 10th grade, 1.7 percent, down from 2.2; eighth grade, 1.8 percent, down from 1.9.