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Modest Declines in Teen Drug Use

But Government Report Shows Rise in Abuse of Painkiller OxyContin

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WebMD Medical News

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Dec. 19, 2005 -- Figures on drug and cigarette use among American teens were mostly flat in 2005, suggesting that improvements seen since the beginning of the decade may be slowing down, a government report showed Monday.

The report was based on surveys of nearly 50,000 U.S. students. It showed no significant changes from 2004 in the use of several drugs, including marijuana, sedatives, and prescription stimulants like Ritalin.

Meanwhile, teens' use of the prescription narcotic painkiller OxyContin continued to rise, researchers said.

Overall 15.8% of teens acknowledged using any illegal drug -- including inhalants -- in the past month, down slightly from 2004. Use among high school seniors rose by 1%, while use among sophomores dropped by 1% and use by eighth-graders was unchanged.

"Most declines halted this year," says Lloyd Johnston, PhD, a University of Michigan researcher, known as the Monitoring the Future Survey.

White House Perspective

Despite the flat 2005 figures, Bush administration officials focused on longer-term trends, which show clear reductions in illegal drug use among U.S. teens. Overall, students' use of most drugs -- including marijuana, anabolic steroids, cigarettes, and alcohol -- have dropped 19% since 2001.

The drop translates to roughly 700,000 fewer American students using drugs now than at the beginning of the decade, says John Walters, director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy.

"We have a broad set of behaviors by young people that are going in a healthy direction," he told reporters.

Officials say they remain concerned about several trends in the report, including a continuing rise in Oxycontin abuse among high school seniors and increasingly common use of widely available but highly toxic inhalants.

Warning on Teen Smoking

Officials also issued a warning that wide gains in smoking may be at an end. Overall smoking rates have dropped between one-third and one-half for U.S. teens since 1997, the year tobacco companies settled a massive lawsuit by states by agreeing to curtail advertising aimed at kids and pay for antismoking campaigns.

But Monday's data show that the number of eighth-graders who smoke daily has stayed flat at roughly 5% since 2002. At the same time, eighth-graders' disapproval of cigarettes and the risk they see in smoking are both down.

Johnston called the trend "worrisome" and cautioned that that declines in smoking are likely to stop as today's eighth-graders move through high school.

"It appears to me they will end in the next couple of years in the upper grades," he says.

Funds for Antismoking Campaigns

Johnston blamed waning funds for youth antismoking campaigns for the apparent shifting attitudes of teens toward smoking. Cigarettes remain the leading preventable cause of death in the U.S. and are blamed for an estimated 440,000 early fatalities per year.

Tobacco company funding for youth antismoking marketing under the 1997 settlement has dropped from \$308 million in 2001 to a scheduled \$40 million in 2006, says Cheryl Heaton, president of the American Legacy Foundation, the group administering the campaign. The campaign includes widespread "truth" antismoking ads aimed at teens.

At the same time, industry marketing and promotion more than doubled to \$15.15 billion between 1998 and 2003, according to a 2003 Federal Trade Commission report.

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