

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

By Alice Park @aliceparkny June 29, 2011

Teen drug use shouldn't be looked at as a rite of passage but as a public health problem, say experts, and one that has reached "epidemic" levels.

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 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. "Science tells us that the 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 attention deficit disorder continues to climb.

Adolescent health experts say that part of the reason for the upward trends has to do with the mixed messages that both parents and society send to adolescents about drug use. "One of the things you hear is that every teen is going to [try some addictive substance]," says Walker. "So what's the big deal, this is normative, and it's fine. But the data shows that no, we should not accept this as

normative for adolescents to use and there's a reason they shouldn't be using, and there are things we can do about it."

For one, she says, parents can educate themselves about the harm that using substances such as tobacco, alcohol and marijuana can have on their child's cognitive development, affecting their ability to form proper judgments and mature emotionally. If parents excuse use of these substances because they're preferable to "harder" drugs such as cocaine, then teens won't learn the important lesson that any exposure to these substances can be harmful to them.

And the costs aren't just limited to possible deficits in development. Drug use carries a high price tag for society as well, with underage drinking costing an estimated \$68 billion yearly in property as well as criminal justice system costs, and substance abuse tallying about \$14 billion in juvenile justice fees. "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. For parents, start talking to your kids when they ask questions in elementary school. Talk to them about your beliefs and feelings about drugs — and teach them that they can hurt them and hurt their development," she says. "And most important, continue that conversation throughout their teens. Establish clear guidelines and set clear consequences for infractions of family rules."