



National Research: 20th Annual Teen Study Shows No Change in Prescription Drug Use; Methamphetamine and Marijuana Down

Data Reveal First Major Increase in Number of Teens Reporting “Learning a Lot” About Risks of Drug Use from Parents

HARTFORD—Parents are talking more to their teens about drug use, but mom and dad are much more likely to discuss illegal drugs than prescription medications, second only to marijuana in rates of abuse among youth, the latest Parent Attitude Tracking Study (PATS) from the Partnership for a Drug-Free America has found. The study also found that youth prescription drug abuse has remained constant even as marijuana and methamphetamine use has substantially declined.

The 2008 study revealed the first major increase in the number of teens who reported “learning a lot” about the risks of drugs from their parents since the inception of the study 20 years ago; 37 percent of teens reported learning a lot about the risks of drugs, a 16 percent increase from the previous year. Research consistently shows that teens who learn a lot about the risks of drugs and alcohol at home are up to 50 percent less likely to use. Yet, many parents have difficulty broaching the topic with their kids.

This progress coincides with data showing sustained declines in several drugs of abuse - notably meth and marijuana - over the past several years. That drop did not carry over to prescription drugs for which teens make up the fastest-growing group of new abusers.

“The strong declines in illegal use combined with the news that teens are learning a lot about drugs and alcohol at home underscores the power and influence of parents,” said Jill Spinetti, president and chief executive officer of The Governor’s Prevention Partnership, which serves as Connecticut’s alliance to the Partnership for a Drug-Free America.

“Yet too many parents are missing opportunities to talk about the intentional abuse of prescription and over-the-counter medications, which is the most pressing—and least understood—threat to our kids,” Spinetti said. “This risky behavior is still not on parents’ radar, many of whom don’t realize that when abused or used without a prescription, these medications can be every bit as dangerous as illegal drugs.”

Connecticut is no exception to the spike in prescription drug-taking among adolescents and young adults over the past decade, experiencing rates comparable to the rest of the nation. Alarm over youth prescription drug use and a related spread of heroin use among those dependent on prescription opioids prompted The Governor’s Prevention Partnership to spearhead a state task force on teen prescription drug abuse.

According to the survey, about 1 in 5 teens (19 percent) or 4.7 million reports abusing a prescription medication at least once in their lives, and 1 in 10 teens (10 percent) or 2.5 million teens reports having abused a prescription pain reliever in the past year. About 7 percent or 1.7 million teens have reported over-the-counter medicine (OTC) use in the past year. The prevalence of and attitudes behind this behavior are cause for ongoing concern. PATS shows 41 percent of teens mistakenly believe that abuse of medicines is less dangerous than abuse of illegal street drugs and 61 percent of teens report prescription drugs are easier to get than illegal drugs, up significantly from 56 percent in 2005.

Despite the increase in parent-teen discussions, adolescents are not learning as much about prescription or OTC medications as they are illegal drugs. Only 24 percent of teens report that their parents talked with

them about the dangers of prescription drug abuse or use of medications outside of a doctor's supervision. Just 18 percent of teens say their parents discuss the risks of abusing OTC cough medicine.

One positive note is teen attitudes toward the abuse of OTC cough medicine have improved with the number of teens who agree that "taking cough medicine to get high is risky" significantly increased from 45 percent in 2007 to 48 percent last year.

"Parent-child communication about the risks of drugs and alcohol is critically important, and research has shown a lack of parental awareness of adolescent substance use," said Dr. Amelia Arria, a senior scientist at the Treatment Research Institute and a nationally recognized researcher on the identification of risk factors for adolescent and young adult drug involvement.

"This study may indicate that parents and teens are finding some common language and that these important messages are getting through," Arria added. "We hope to see this trend continue to increase, as there's still much work to be done."

The study also indicates a strong correlation between increased teen exposure to anti-drug messages on television and a decreased likelihood of trying drugs over the past ten years. Four out of ten teens (41 percent) agreed that anti-drug messages made them more aware of the risks of using drugs and less likely to try drugs (42 percent).

Progress: Fewer Teens Using Marijuana and Meth

While marijuana remains the most widely used drug among teens, PATS indicates marijuana use has been declining for a decade, with past-year use down 24 percent since 1998, and past-month use down a full 30 percent (from 23 percent of teens down to 16 percent) over the same time period. Teen attitudes also reflect growing social disapproval of the drug, with 35 percent of teens agreeing strongly they "don't want to hang around with anyone who uses marijuana," up from 28 percent a decade ago.

Rates of marijuana use by Connecticut teens, routinely higher than the national average, have also fallen, but by a smaller amount, according to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health. From 2002-2003 to 2005-2006, past-year marijuana use among 12-to-17-year-olds as a whole decreased 16 percent compared to 6 percent for that age group in Connecticut. Among 18-to-25-year-olds, Connecticut has ranked among the states with the highest rates of marijuana use since the survey first generated state estimates in 2002-2003. In 2005-2006, 16.44 percent of 12-to-17-year-olds in Connecticut reported using marijuana in the past year while more than a quarter of young adults (28.03 percent) did.

According to the study, teen meth use has experienced a steep three-year drop, with past-month use down to 3 percent of teens – a significant 25 percent decline versus 2005. Teen attitudes about meth use corroborate this drop – 83 percent of teens see great risk in using meth regularly, about 85 percent see great risk in "getting hooked on meth" and more than half of teens, (54 percent) see trying meth once or twice as very risky.

The Northeast largely escaped the ravages of meth that hit elsewhere. Connecticut has consistently experienced one of the lowest rates of meth use in the nation.

"We are making inroads in Connecticut but the data show that, whether at home or in school, we can't let up on informing teens about the risks drug and alcohol use pose to their health and futures," said Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services Deputy Commissioner Peter Rockholz, who also serves as co-chairman of the prescription drug task force. "It's important that all adults in our teens' lives send that same message, unequivocally."

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Warning Signs: Teens See Slightly Less Risk in Steroid and Inhalant Use

Steroid use remains low at 4 percent for lifetime use among teens. While there has been little overall change in the number of teens who see “great risk” in abusing steroids, fewer teens this year (65 percent) agreed strongly that teens who use steroids for athletic performance or physical appearance are putting their health at risk, down from 69 percent last year.

Pre-teen and teen inhalant use remains steady at 11 percent for past year use, yet only 66 percent of teens report that “sniffing or huffing things to get high can kill you.” Both categories of abuse merit careful monitoring— as attitudes towards inhalant and steroid abuse weaken, use is more likely to increase.

“We must be vigilant when attitudes show signs of weakening because this may portend future increases in substance use,” said Marlene McGann, chairwoman of the Connecticut Inhalant Task Force and director of the Meriden and Wallingford Substance Abuse Council.

Insight: Today’s Teens More Open About Discussing Substance Abuse, Seeking Help for Friends

The 20th annual study offers new insights into the way the current generation of teens view substance abuse. PATS 2008 showed a statistically significant increase in the number of teens who reported trying to talk a friend out of using drugs at 41 percent and 40 percent of teens report being aware that they have a family member with a drug or alcohol problem.

“With over 6,500 teens from across the nation in the study, these data indicate this generation has greater sensitivity to the health risks and downsides of substance abuse,” Spinetti said. “Teens live in a world of social networking and connectedness – they’re more open, constantly sharing their thoughts and experiences. Teens recognize the impact of use, know others with a problem and seem to attach less stigma to getting help for themselves or a friend who is in trouble.”

Given that kids who learn a lot about the dangers of drugs from their parents are up to 50 percent less likely to ever use, parents are encouraged to have frequent ongoing conversations with their children about the dangers of drugs and alcohol and the abuse of Rx and OTC drugs.

Parent visitors to www.drugfree.org and www.preventionworksct.org can learn to talk with their kids about drugs and alcohol and take charge of the conversation with their kids.

The 20th annual national study of 6,518 teens in grades 7-12 is nationally projectable with a +/- 1.3 percent margin of error. PATS Teens 2008 was conducted in private, public and parochial schools for the Partnership by the Roper Public Affairs Division of GfK Custom Research. For more information and the full PATS Teens Report visit www.drugfree.org.

Co-chaired by Gov. M. Jodi Rell and a leader of the business community, The Governor’s Prevention Partnership is a public-private partnership devoted to building a strong, healthy workforce through its leadership in youth mentoring and the prevention of underage drinking, violence and substance abuse.

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