



Substance Abuse

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Co-Lead Agencies: National Institutes of Health
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

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Goal

Reduce substance abuse to protect the health, safety, and quality of life for all, especially children.

Overview

Substance abuse and its related problems are among society's most pervasive health and social concerns. Each year, about 100,000 deaths in the United States are related to alcohol consumption.¹ Illicit drug abuse and related acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) deaths account for at least another 12,000 deaths. In 1995, the economic cost of alcohol and drug abuse was \$276 billion.² This represents more than \$1,000 for every man, woman, and child in the United States to cover the costs of health care, motor vehicle crashes, crime, lost productivity, and other adverse outcomes of alcohol and drug abuse.

Issues and Trends

Although there has been a long-term drop in overall use, many people in the United States still use illicit drugs. In 1998, there were 13.6 million current users of any illicit drug in the total household population aged 12 years and older, representing 6.2 percent of the total population.³ Marijuana is the most commonly used illicit drug, and 60 percent of users abuse marijuana only.³ Among persons aged 12 years and older, 35.8 percent have used an illegal drug in their lifetime. Of these, more than 90 percent used marijuana or hashish, and approximately 30 percent tried cocaine.³ Relatively rare in 1996, methamphetamine use began spreading in 1997.^{3,4}

Estimated rates of chronic drug use also are significant. Of the estimated 4.4 million chronic drug users in the United States in 1995, 3.6 million were chronic cocaine users (primarily crack cocaine), and 810,000 were chronic heroin users.⁵

Drug dependence is a chronic, relapsing disorder. Addicted persons frequently engage in self-destructive and criminal behavior. Research has confirmed that treatment can help end dependence on addictive drugs and reduce the consequences of addictive drug use on society. While no single approach for substance abuse and addiction treatment exists, comprehensive and carefully tailored treatment works.⁶

Drug use among adolescents aged 12 to 17 years doubled between 1992 and 1997, from 5.3 percent to 11.4 percent.³ Youth marijuana use has been associated with a number of dangerous behaviors. Nearly 1 million youth aged 16 to 18 years (11 percent of the total) have reported driving in the past year at least once within 2 hours of using an illegal drug (most often marijuana).⁷ Drug and alcohol use by youth is associated with other forms of unhealthy and unproductive behavior, including high-risk sexual activity.

Drug users and persons with whom they have sexual contact run high risks of contracting gonorrhea, syphilis, hepatitis, tuberculosis, and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). The relationship between injection drug use and HIV/AIDS transmission is well known. Injection drug use also is associated with hepatitis B and C infections.⁸

Research confirms that a substantial number of frequent users of cocaine, heroin, and illicit drugs other than marijuana have co-occurring chronic mental health disorders. Some of these persons can be identified by their behavior problems at the time of their entry into elementary school.⁹ Such youth tend to use substances at a young age and exhibit sensation-seeking (or "novelty-seeking") behaviors. These youth benefit from more intensive preventive interventions, including family therapy and parent training programs.^{10,11}

The stigma attached to substance abuse increases the severity of the problem. The hiding of substance abuse, for example, can prevent persons from seeking and continuing treatment and from having a productive attitude toward treatment. Compounding the problem is the gap between the number of available treatment slots and the number of persons seeking treatment for illicit drug use or problem alcohol use.

Disparities

Substance abuse affects all racial, cultural, and economic groups. Alcohol is the most commonly used substance, regardless of race or ethnicity, and there are far more persons who smoke cigarettes than persons who use illicit drugs. Usage rates for an array of substances reveal that for adolescents aged 12 to 17 years:

- Whites and Hispanics are more likely than African Americans to use alcohol.
- Whites are more likely than African Americans and Hispanics to use tobacco.
- Whites and Hispanics are more likely than African Americans to use illicit drugs.

Older adolescents and adults with co-occurring substance abuse and mental health disorders need explicit and appropriate treatment for their disorders. Those who suffer from co-occurring disorders, however, frequently are turned away from treatment designed for one or the other problem but not for both.

Opportunities

Many opportunities to prevent drug-related problems have been identified. Core strategies for preventing drug abuse among youth include raising awareness, educating and training parents and others, strengthening families, providing alternative activities, building skills and confidence, mobilizing and empowering communities, and employing environmental approaches. Studies indicate that making youth and others aware of the health, social, and legal consequences associated with drug abuse has an impact on use. Parents also play a primary role in helping their children understand the dangers of substance abuse and in communicating their expectation that drug and alcohol use will not be tolerated. Research suggests that improving parent/child attachment and supervision and monitoring also protect youth from substance abuse. Alternative activities for youth teach social skills and provide an alternative to substance abuse. According to one study, programs that help young persons develop psychosocial and peer resistance skills are more successful than other programs in preventing drug abuse.⁶ Findings suggest that having community partnerships in place for sustained periods of time produces significant results in decreasing alcohol and drug use in males. Literature shows that having “buy-in” from local participants greatly enhances the success of any endeavor. Studies also show that changing norms is extremely effective in reducing substance abuse and related problems.⁶

For substance abuse prevention to be effective, people need access to culturally, linguistically, and age-appropriate services; job training and employment; parenting training; general education; more behavioral research; and programs for women, dually diagnosed patients, and persons with learning disabilities. Particular attention must be given to young persons under age 18 years who have an addicted parent because these youth are at increased risk for substance abuse. Because alcoholism and drug abuse continue to affect lesbians, gay men, and transgendered persons at two to three times the rate of the general population,¹² programs that address the special risks and requirements of these population groups also are needed. Government, employers, the faith community, and other organizations in the private and nonprofit sectors must increase their level of cooperation and coordination to ensure that multiple service needs are met.



REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH–RELATED OBJECTIVES

Substance Abuse

Goal:

Reduce substance abuse to protect the health, safety, and quality of life for all, especially children.

Number Objective Short Title

Treatment for Substance Abuse

26-20. Treatment for injection drug use

HEALTHY PEOPLE 2010 OBJECTIVES

Treatment for Substance Abuse

26-20. Increase the number of admissions to substance abuse treatment for injection drug use.

Target: 200,000 admissions.

Baseline: 167,960 admissions for injection drug use were reported in 1997.

Target setting method: 19 percent improvement.

Data source: Treatment Episodes Data System, OAS, SAMHSA.

The 167,960 admissions to treatment for injection drug use indicates a large unmet need for treatment in this group, because estimates of injection drug users in the Nation are as high as 810,000.¹³ Better data are needed on this group's need for treatment. Because of the consequences associated with HIV/AIDS, injection drug users are a high priority population group needing substance abuse treatment. HIV infection among females and infants in the United States can be traced primarily to contaminated drug "works" and to sexual relations with infected drug users. Pediatric AIDS is a particularly virulent problem among the children of persons involved in drug-related lifestyles. To address these problems, substance abuse treatment must be provided for injection drug users. Such treatment will be most effective against HIV if it includes information, counseling, and other assistance on how to prevent HIV and unintended pregnancy.

Terminology

Chronic drug use: Use of any heroin or cocaine more than 10 days in the past month.

Co-occurring disorders: The simultaneous presence of two or more disorders, such as the coexistence of a mental health disorder and substance abuse problem.

Drug dependence: A pattern of drug use leading to clinically significant impairment or distress, as manifested by three or more of the following occurring at any time in the same 12-month period: tolerance; withdrawal; use in larger amounts or over a longer period of time than intended; persistent desire or unsuccessful efforts to cut down; spending a great deal of time in activities necessary to obtain drug(s); giving up or reducing important social, occupational, or recreational activities; continued use despite knowledge of having a persistent or recurrent physical or psychological problem.

Hepatitis B and C: Viral infections of the liver spread through contact with infected blood products, injection use of drugs, and needle-sharing.

Injection drug use: The use of a needle and syringe to inject illicit drugs (for example, heroin, cocaine, steroids) into the vein, muscle, skin, or below the skin. Injection drug use places the user at great risk for transmitting or contracting a number of bloodborne infectious diseases, including HIV, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C.

Substance abuse: The problematic consumption or illicit use of alcoholic beverages, tobacco products, and drugs, including misuse of prescription drugs.

Universal preventive interventions: Interventions targeted to the public or a whole population group that has not been identified on the basis of individual risk. The intervention is desirable for everyone in that group. Universal interventions have advantages in terms of cost and overall effectiveness for large populations.

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