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Drug use trends remain stable or decline among teens

NIH's 2015 Monitoring the Future survey shows long term decline in illicit drug use, prescription opioid abuse, cigarette and alcohol use among the nation's youth

The 2015 Monitoring the Future survey (MTF) shows decreasing use of a number of substances, including cigarettes, alcohol, prescription opioid pain relievers, and synthetic cannabinoids (“synthetic marijuana”). Other drug use remains stable, including marijuana, with continued high rates of daily use reported among 12th graders, and ongoing declines in perception of its harms.

The MTF survey measures drug use and attitudes among eighth, 10th, and 12th graders, and is funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), part of the National Institutes of Health. The survey has been conducted by researchers at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor since 1975.



For the first time, daily marijuana use exceeds daily tobacco cigarette use among 12th graders. Daily marijuana use for this group remained relatively stable at 6 percent, compared to 5.5 percent reporting daily cigarette smoking (down from 6.7 percent in 2014).

“We are heartened to see that most illicit drug use is not increasing, non-medical use of prescription opioids is decreasing, and there is improvement in alcohol and cigarette use rates,” said Nora D. Volkow, M.D., director of NIDA. “However, continued areas of concern are the high rate of daily marijuana smoking seen among high school students, because of marijuana’s potential deleterious effects on the developing brains of teenagers, and the high rates of overall tobacco products and nicotine containing e-cigarettes usage.”

“This year’s Monitoring the Future data continue the promising trends from last year with declining rates of adolescent substance use, and support the value of evidence-based prevention, treatment, and recovery,” said National Drug Control Policy Director Michael Botticelli. “Efforts to prevent drug use from ever starting are particularly important as we work to reduce the rising number of drug overdoses across the country. I encourage parents, teachers, coaches, and mentors to have a conversation with the young people in their lives about making the healthy decisions that will keep them on a path toward a successful future.”

“We are very encouraged by the continued decline in underage drinking illustrated in these data,” said George F. Koob, Ph.D., director of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. “However, the percent of underage individuals drinking still remains unacceptably

high. For example, approximately 40 percent of 12th graders have reported being drunk in the past year and binge drinking remains a significant problem.”

Other highlights from the 2015 survey:

Drugs

- Use of many illicit drugs has trended down. Among high school seniors, 23.6 percent report using an illicit drug in the past month, with 7.6 percent reporting they used an illicit drug other than marijuana.
- Perception of marijuana use as risky continues to decline, with 31.9 percent of seniors saying regular use could be harmful, compared to 36.1 percent last year.
- Past year use of synthetic cannabinoids (“synthetic marijuana”) is at 5.2 percent for 12th graders, down significantly from 11.4 in 2011, the first year it was measured in the survey.
- Past year use of heroin, typically very low among teens, is at an all-time low at 0.3 percent for eighth graders, and 0.5 for 10th and 12th graders.
- Use of MDMA (also known as Ecstasy or Molly), inhalants, and LSD are generally stable or down. In 2015, 3.6 percent of seniors reported past year use of MDMA, compared to 5 percent in 2014.
- Non-medical use of the prescription amphetamine Adderall, typically given for ADHD, remains high at 7.5 percent among 12th graders.
- Use of prescription opioids continues its downward trend, with 4.4 percent of high school seniors reporting non-medical use of Vicodin (hydrocodone and acetaminophen), down from a peak of 10.5 percent in 2003.
- Most teens abusing prescription opioids report getting them from friends or family members. However, one-third report getting them from their own prescriptions, underscoring the need to monitor teens taking opioids and evaluate prescribing practices.

Tobacco

- Cigarette smoking rates have greatly declined among teens in recent years. For example, among 10th graders, there has been a 54.9 percent drop in daily smoking in just five years, reported at just 3 percent this year compared to 6.6 percent five years ago.
- However, rates of use of other tobacco products, while not significantly changed from 2014, remain high with 12th graders, reporting rates of past year use of hookah and small cigars of 19.8 percent and 15.9 percent, respectively.
- More than 75 percent of high school seniors view smoking a pack or more a day as harmful, compared to 51.3 percent in 1975, first year of the survey.
- As e-cigarettes are currently unregulated, there is limited data on what chemicals teens are actually smoking. However, when asked what they inhaled the last time they used an e-cigarette, only about 20 percent said they were using nicotine. Most say they inhaled flavoring alone and many admitted they were unsure what they inhaled. In fact, about 13 percent of eighth graders who use e-cigarettes said they did not know what was in the device they used. Furthermore, some products labeled nicotine-free may actually contain nicotine.
- Roughly twice as many boys as girls report using e-cigarettes (21.5 percent to 10.9 percent).

Alcohol

- Alcohol use continues its gradual downward trend among teens, with significant changes seen in the past five years in nearly all measures.
- Binge drinking (described as having five or more drinks in a row within the past two weeks) is 17.2 percent among seniors, down from 19.4 percent last year and down from peak rates in 1998 at 31.5 percent.
- 37.7 percent of 12th graders say they have been drunk in the past year, compared to 41.4 percent in 2014 and 53.2 percent in 2001, when rates were highest for that group.
- High school seniors see a distinction in potential harmfulness between one or two drinks nearly every day (21.5 percent) versus four to five drinks nearly every day (59.1 percent).

Overall, 44,892 students from 382 public and private schools participated in this year's MTF survey. Since 1975, the survey has measured drug, alcohol, and cigarette use and related attitudes in 12th graders nationwide. Eighth and 10th graders were added to the survey in 1991. Survey participants generally report their drug use behaviors across three time periods: lifetime, past year, and past month. Questions are also asked about daily cigarette and marijuana use. NIDA has provided funding for the survey since its inception by a team of investigators at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, led by Drs. Lloyd Johnston and Richard Miech. MTF is funded under grant number DA001411. Additional information on the MTF Survey, as well as comments from Dr. Volkow, can be found at www.drugabuse.gov/drugpages/MTF.html. The University of Michigan press release can be found at <http://monitoringthefuture.org>.

MTF is one of three major surveys sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that provide data on substance use among youth. The others are the National Survey on Drug Use and Health and the Youth Risk Behavior Survey. The MTF website is: www.monitoringthefuture.org. Follow Monitoring the Future 2015 news on Twitter at [@NIDANews](https://twitter.com/NIDANews), or join the conversation by using: [#MTF2015](https://twitter.com/MTF2015). Additional survey results can be found at www.hhs.gov/news or www.whitehouse.gov/ondcp. Information on all of the surveyed drugs can be found on NIDA's Web site: www.drugabuse.gov.

The National Survey on Drug Use and Health, sponsored by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, is the primary source of statistical information on substance use in the U.S. population 12 years of age and older. More information is available at: <http://www.samhsa.gov/data/population-data-nsduh>.

The Youth Risk Behavior Survey, part of HHS's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, is a school-based survey that collects data from students in grades nine–12. The survey includes questions on a wide variety of health-related risk behaviors, including substance abuse. More information is available at www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/yrbs/index.htm. Additionally, the National Youth Tobacco Survey, a school-based survey of U.S. students in grades six-12 conducted by the CDC in collaboration with the Food and Drug Administration, collects data on the use of multiple tobacco products, including e-cigarettes. More information is available at www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data_statistics/surveys/NYTS/.

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