

Alcohol, cannabis, and the medicine cabinet pose biggest drug threats to teens

Youth using prescription pain relievers, over the counter cold medication non-medically

Nov. 18, 2009 – TORONTO – While fewer teens are drinking alcohol in 2009 than a decade ago, binge drinking, use of cannabis and prescription drugs remain a concern, according to the 2009 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey (OSDUHS) released today by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

In 2009, 58% of students in grades 7 to 12 (representing about 591,000 Ontario students) reported drinking alcohol in the past year, down from 66% in 1999, says study co-author Dr. Jürgen Rehm, a senior scientist at CAMH. "The usual suspect of alcohol accounts for most drug use among Ontario teens, and the long-term trend for drugs such as alcohol and tobacco is going in the right direction," he says. The downward trend is not found for cannabis, he adds.

One in four Ontario teens is a binge drinker

About a quarter of students (representing about 250,000) reported binge drinking (defined as five or more drinks on one occasion) in the four weeks before the survey, says Dr. Rehm. Rates of binge drinking were the same for males and females, but increased with grade from 3% of 7th-graders up to 49% of 12th-graders. One in five (about 211,000 students) may be drinking hazardously (defined as a risky pattern of alcohol use that increases the likelihood of physical, psychological, or social problems).

Year-to-year, binge drinking rates have remained fairly stable; binge drinking contributes significantly to trauma and death of teens through drunk driving and other alcohol-related incidents, according to CAMH senior scientist Dr. Robert Mann, a co-author of the report. The percentage of high school drivers who reported drinking and driving (12%, about 34,000 drivers) or using cannabis and driving (17%, about 48,000 drivers) represents a substantial number of young people at risk, as does the bigger group of students who reported riding in a vehicle driven by someone who had been drinking (23%, about 219,000) or using drugs (18%, about 185,000). One in ten students reported personally being injured or injuring someone else in the past year as a result of their own drinking.

"There is danger in taking a complacent 'kids-will-be-kids' attitude," Dr. Rehm said. "Research has clearly indicated that earlier start of drinking or using drugs is associated with higher risk of dependence in adulthood."

Rummaging through the medicine cabinet

Non-medical use of prescription opioid pain relievers such as Tylenol® No. 3, Percocet®, or OxyContin® remains a concern, especially among female youth, says Dr. Rehm. One in five teen girls reports using an opioid pain reliever without a prescription. Most users reported obtaining these drugs from home. "Most likely teens get prescription opioids by rummaging through the medicine cabinet and using whatever prescription pain medications they find." Dr. Rehm adds.

Other drug use

While the study shows a decline in the use of many illicit drugs over the past decade, cannabis use remains stable. One quarter of students (representing about 261,000 in

Ontario) reported using cannabis at least once in the past year, with use increasing substantially with grade to almost half of 12th-graders. About 3% of students (representing 29,000) may have a cannabis dependence problem.

Despite long-term decreases, tobacco use by students remains a concern due to its known health consequences later in life; 12% of students reported smoking cigarettes either occasionally or daily (about 119,000 students). Just over half of smokers reported smoking contraband cigarettes in the past year.

The researchers also found that 42% of all students (about 409,000) reported use of any drug other than alcohol or tobacco, including illicit drugs and non-medical use of prescription and over-the-counter drugs. This proportion increases with grade, reaching 55% by grade 12.

Other survey highlights include:

- New to the survey in 2009, students were asked about using certain over-the-counter cough and cold medications, and 7% (representing about 70,000 students) reported using these to get high during the past year. New data on the use of salvia divinorum, a legal plant with hallucinogenic properties, show that 4% of students (about 42,000) used this drug in the past year.
- Despite media attention focused on methamphetamine and crystal methamphetamine, there is no evidence that either drug has diffused into the student population in Ontario. Other so-called "street" drugs such as crack and heroin also showed extremely low rates of use.
- 16% of students (about 152,000) reported getting drunk or high at school at least once during the past year, and 23% (about 219,000) reported that they were sold, given or offered a drug at school in the past year.

"This OSDUHS Survey is a clarion call for governments at all levels to focus prevention efforts on legally available drugs like alcohol and prescription opioids," said Gail Czukar, CAMH's Executive Vice President of Policy, Education and Health Promotion.

CAMH's Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey (OSDUHS) is Canada's longest running school survey of adolescents, describing drug use and other health-related behaviours, and changes since 1977. During the 2008/2009 school year, 9,112 students in grades 7 to 12 from 47 school boards, 181 schools, and 573 classes participated in the survey administered by the Institute for Social Research, York University. This sample represents about 1,023,900 Ontario students in grades 7 through 12.

To read the Executive Summary or full report: <http://www.camh.net/research/osdus.html>

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The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) is Canada's largest mental health and addiction teaching hospital, as well as one of the world's leading research centres in the area of addiction and mental health. CAMH combines clinical care, research, education, policy development, prevention and health promotion to transform the lives of people affected by mental health and addiction issues.