

Substance Abuse Prevention

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KEYWORDS

- Prevention • Substance abuse • Early intervention • School-based programs
- Substance use disorders • Risk factors

KEY POINTS

- Drug abuse is a common and prevalent problem among youth.
- Prevention interventions are classified as universal (population level), selective (targeting at-risk individuals), or indicated (targeting individuals showing early signs and symptoms of the illness).
- Additional research is needed to develop effective early and indicated interventions for youth at early stages of substance abuse.

INTRODUCTION

Research over the past 2 decades has clearly established substance use disorder (SUD) as a chronic, neurobiologically based medical illness with characteristics that are similar to other chronic medical conditions such as diabetes, asthma, obesity, and hypertension.¹ Advances in the treatment of many chronic medical conditions can be characterized generally by the development of more effective public education programs about risk and protective factors, systematic screening to identify at-risk individuals, and the development of more effective prevention and earlier interventions for individuals with early signs and symptoms of the illness. Progress in prevention and treatment of SUD has lagged behind progress in other areas of medicine. Substance abuse continues to account for nearly 6% of all deaths worldwide.² In the United States alone, the annual economic burden incurred through loss of work productivity,

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Abbreviations

| | |
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| CBT | Cognitive-behavioral therapy |
| EFC | Educational feedback control |
| MET | Motivational enhancement therapy |
| SUD | Substance use disorder |
| TND | Project toward no drug abuse |

health care expenses, and crime secondary to substance abuse is estimated to be more than \$700 billion.³

Approximately 4 out of 5 drug users begin using during adolescence, and it is estimated that approximately 11% of adolescents meet diagnostic criteria for a SUD before age 18.⁴ Alcohol continues to be the most widely used substance among adolescents with almost 25% of high school seniors reporting at least 1 episode of binge drinking (≥ 5 drinks on 1 occasion) in the past 2 weeks and nearly 40% reporting illicit drug use in the past year. Although there have been gradual decreases in the prevalence of cigarette smoking and alcohol use since the mid-1990s, rates of marijuana use and nonmedical prescription drug abuse have been increasing since 2009.⁵ In 2014, more than 20% of high school seniors reported using marijuana regularly (at least monthly) and nearly 6% reported using daily or near daily.⁵ Increases in adolescent marijuana use are thought to be connected to a growing national support for the legalization of medical and recreational marijuana. The majority of adults and adolescents believe that regular marijuana use causes little harm.⁵ This perception is in contrast to research showing that regular marijuana use during adolescence—a time of rapid brain development—is associated with persistent neurocognitive deficits and reductions in adult IQ that may not be fully reversible, even with abstinence.^{6–9} Regular marijuana use during adolescence is also associated with lower overall academic achievement, higher rates of high school dropout, lower rates of college entrance and completion, as well as higher unemployment or underemployment in adulthood.¹⁰

The enormous public health impact of substance abuse, which typically begins during adolescence, highlights the importance of effective youth substance use prevention and treatment. Prevention science differentiates 3 types of prevention interventions: (1) universal or population-based strategies that affect everyone, (2) selective interventions for at-risk groups, and (3) indicated prevention for youth who have high-risk behaviors, including substance use or problematic use.^{11,12} Most existing substance prevention programs include psychoeducational components and skills-based learning to reduce factors and increase protective factors.

Although a comprehensive review of drug/alcohol prevention interventions is beyond the scope of this article, representative drug/alcohol prevention interventions that have substantial empirical support are discussed.

SCHOOL-BASED PREVENTION STRATEGIES

The majority of existing prevention interventions are school-based programs because schools are an efficient way of reaching a large number of students across multiple grade levels.

Universal School-based Prevention

In the school setting, universal prevention typically includes substance awareness education and school-wide adoption of specific behavioral management programs that

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