

How Adolescents used Drugs during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Rajesh R Wakaskar*

Formulation Scientist, Insys Therapeutics, USA

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in earnest in the United States in early 2020, affected different demographic groups in different ways. According to a new study, among adolescents ages 10 to 14 in the United States, the overall rate of drug use remained relatively stable in the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, one change was a decreased use of alcohol, but an increased use of nicotine and misuse of prescription drugs.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has produced sustained disruptions to several domains of adolescents' lives, including alcohol and drug use," "Thus, surveillance of adolescent substance use is an important public health priority."

The ABCD study, which began in 2015 with central components and leadership, is following almost 12,000 children for at least 10 years, starting at ages 9 to 10. Researchers will track the children's biological and behavioral development through adolescence into young adulthood.

In the current paper, researchers monitored 7,842 adolescents and their families at 21 sites across the United States for six months following the first issuing of stay-at-home orders. In multiple surveys, the participants were asked to describe their substance use, including alcohol, tobacco and un-prescribed drugs.

Surveys also assessed youth's intensity of worry about COVID-19 and measured related stressors, such as educational disruptions, loss of jobs or hardships within their families.

Survey responses were adjusted so that ABCD participants reflected the demographics of same-age youth across the United States. Substance use among surveyed adolescents was stable during the first six months of the pandemic: 8% reported using a substance in the past 30 days; 3.4% reported using alcohol; 3.6% reported using nicotine.

Compared to pre-pandemic behavior, use of alcohol declined, but use of nicotine or misuse of prescription drugs increased, perhaps, suggested researchers, because the latter are easier to hide when families were locked down together.

In families that experienced loss of income or material hardship during the pandemic, substance use among youth was higher. Heightened stress, depression and anxiety were all robustly associated with youth substance abuse.

"Taken together, these findings underscore the disproportionate burden of the pandemic on youth and families with pre-existing disadvantages," "Providing material support to distressed families and linking emotionally distressed youth to support may serve as important risk-mitigation strategies, both today and during similar events in the future."

"Continued surveillance of adolescents' alcohol and drug use as many adolescents return to their pre-pandemic routines will comprise an important public health priority and goal of the ABCD Study."

*Correspondence to: Rajesh R Wakaskar, Formulation Scientist, Insys Therapeutics, USA, E-mail: rajesh.wakaskar@gmail.com

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