Substance use has declined or stabilized since the mid-1990s.

One in five 12th graders smokes cigarettes daily.

About half of White and Hispanic 12th graders used alcohol in the past thirty days.

Marijuana is the most widely-used illicit drug among adolescents.

Initiation of substance use most often occurs between grades 7 and 10.

Past thirty-day substance use among 12th graders increased in the early 1990s, after a steady decline in use of alcohol and illicit drugs, and small decreases in cigarette use since 1975. However, use of alcohol and cigarettes decreased again in the late 1990s, while the level of illicit drug use remained stable. In 2002, alcohol remained by far the most commonly used substance: 48.6% of 12th graders reported use within the past 30 days, compared to 26.7% for cigarettes, and 25.4% for any illicit drug (Johnston et al., 2002; MTF, 2002).
One in five 12th graders smokes cigarettes daily.

Patterns of Past Thirty-Day Tobacco Use by Grade Level, 2002

The percentage of students who report smoking cigarettes in the past thirty days more than doubles between 8th and 12th grade. In 2002, about one in five 12th graders reported daily smoking, compared to one in ten 10th graders and one in twenty 8th graders. Almost one-third of 12th graders who report past 30-day use smoke half-a-pack or more daily. Cigarette use among males and females is similar at all grade levels. However, 12th grade males are about ten times more likely than females to use smokeless tobacco (12.2% vs. 1.2%) (data not shown) (MTF, 2002).

Over one-third of White 12th graders smoked in the past thirty days.

Past Thirty-Day Cigarette Use by Race/Ethnicity and Grade Level, 2002

In 2002, 32.5% of White 12th graders reported using cigarettes in the past month, a figure 1.5-3 times that of same-age Hispanics and Blacks (21.3% and 12.1%, respectively) (MTF, 2002). Race/ethnicity data available from the 2001 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA) show that among 12-17 year-olds, American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) youth were most likely to report having smoked within the past month, and Black youth were least likely to smoke (SAMHSA, 2002).

The number of new daily smokers has decreased among adolescents and young adults.


Initiation of daily smoking among adolescents ages 12-17 increased dramatically between 1991 and 1997, after almost a decade of decline. Use declined in the late 1990s, with the number of new daily smokers dropping from 1.1 million in 1997 to 747,000 in 2000. The number of young adult initiates has declined overall during the past three decades, and is at a historic low (SAMHSA, 2002). A recent study found that 95% of youth ages 12-17 who smoke tried their first cigarette by age 15 (CASA, 2002).
Thirty percent of twelfth graders report binge drinking over a two-week period.

Patterns of Alcohol Use by Grade Level, 2002

Half of 12th graders reported using alcohol during the last thirty days in 2002. About 30% of 12th graders reported binge drinking within the last two weeks. This suggests that at least three out of five 12th graders who use alcohol are binge drinkers. Although alcohol use was much lower for 8th graders, 12.4% reported binge drinking. Gender differences in binge drinking increase with age, with 12th grade males more likely to binge drink than females (34.2% vs. 23.0%) (data not shown) (MTF, 2002).

About half of White and Hispanic 12th graders used alcohol in the past thirty days.

Past Thirty-Day Alcohol Use by Race/Ethnicity and Grade Level, 2002

White and Hispanic 12th graders are more likely to report using alcohol than their Black peers (MTF, 2002). Data from the 2001 NHSDA¹ show alcohol use for youth ages 12-17 is most prevalent among AI/AN youth and least prevalent among Black youth (SAMHSA, 2002). Data from 2002 show that the gender difference in alcohol use increases with age: among 8th graders, males are slightly more likely to drink than females (20.0% vs. 19.1%), but among 12th graders, there is a larger gap in use between males and females (52.3% vs. 45.1%) (data not shown) (MTF, 2002).

Almost one in ten adolescents who use alcohol also reported carrying a handgun.

Past-Year Health Risks by Past-Month Alcohol Use, Ages 12-17, 2000

Adolescents who used alcohol in the past month were three times more likely to carry a handgun in the past year than their peers who did not use alcohol. Alcohol use is highly associated with other risky behaviors, including fighting and thinking about or trying to commit suicide. Additionally, between 1999 and 2000, 20% of young adults ages 18-25 reported driving under the influence of alcohol, and 10.7% reported driving under the influence of any illicit drug (SAMHSA, 2001; OAS, 2002).
Illicit drug use among adolescents varies slightly for most racial/ethnic groups.

Marijuana is the most widely-used illicit drug among adolescents.

The use of MDMA/Ecstasy has increased dramatically in the past few years.

2002 data for Past-Year MDMA Use is currently not available for College Students and Young Adults. Data will be available in Fall 2003 on the Monitoring the Future web site.
Over the past 25 years, binge drinking, daily cigarette use, and daily use of half-a-pack or more of cigarettes has declined among 12th graders, with daily half-a-pack use decreasing the most (97%). Daily marijuana use has not changed between 1975 and 2002. However, there is still a high prevalence of high-risk substance use: 3 out of 10 twelfth graders are binge drinkers, 1 out of 6 are daily smokers, and 1 in 11 smoke half a pack or more daily (Johnston et al., 2002; MTF, 2002).

In 2000, almost two-thirds of past-month heavy drinkers ages 12-17 (2.6% of this age group) also used an illicit drug. One in five of all past-month alcohol users (16.4% of this age group) were also illicit drug users. Among non-drinkers, only 4.2% used illicit drugs in the past month. Over 40% of past-month smokers used an illicit drug, but less than 5% of non-smokers used any illicit drugs and less than 3% used marijuana (SAMHSA, 2001).

In 2001, 12th graders most frequently reported initiating substance use between the 7th and 10th grades. Alcohol and illicit drug use were most likely to begin in 9th grade, while cigarettes were most often first tried in 7th or 8th grade. Trend data show little change in age of initiation over the past decade (Johnston et al., 2002). According to a 2002 survey among youth ages 12-17, the average age of first use is 12 for cigarettes, 12.5 for alcohol and 13.5 for marijuana (CASA, 2002).

Initiation of substance use most often occurs between grades 7 and 10.

Almost seven out of ten past-month heavy drinkers also use an illicit drug.

Daily 1/2 Pack+ cigarette use decreased the most among the common high-risk uses of substances by adolescents.

Over the past 25 years, binge drinking, daily cigarette use, and daily use of half-a-pack or more of cigarettes has declined among 12th graders, with daily half-a-pack use decreasing the most (97%). Daily marijuana use has not changed between 1975 and 2002. However, there is still a high prevalence of high-risk substance use: 3 out of 10 twelfth graders are binge drinkers, 1 out of 6 are daily smokers, and 1 in 11 smoke half a pack or more daily (Johnston et al., 2002; MTF, 2002).
Data Sources:


Text Notes:
1 The National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA) reports lower levels of use than the Monitoring the Future (MTF) survey. This may be due to more under-reporting in the household setting as compared with the school setting. MTF collects data for Whites, Blacks and Hispanics. NHSDA categorizes data by Hispanics overall and non-Hispanics for each racial group - White, Black, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, More than one race (SAMHSA, 2002; Johnston et al., 2002; MTF, 2002).
2 The Previous graph may underestimate Ecstasy use due to NHSDA’s different survey methodology; see note 1 (SAMHSA, 2002).

Graph Notes:
* Heavy alcohol use is defined as consuming 5 or more drinks on the same occasion on 5 or more days in the past 30 days. Heavy alcohol users are also binge alcohol users (SAMHSA, 2002).

In all cases, the most recent available data were used. Some data are released 1-3 years after collection. For questions regarding data sources or availability, please contact NAHIC. For racial/ethnic data, the category names presented are those of the data sources used. Every attempt was made to standardize age ranges, when this was not possible, age ranges are those of the data sources used.

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NAHIC Fact Sheets
- Fact Sheet on Adolescent Health Care Utilization
- Fact Sheet on Demographics: Children & Adolescents
- Fact Sheet on Mental Health: Adolescents & Young Adults
- Fact Sheet on Mortality: Adolescents & Young Adults
- Fact Sheet on Preventive Health Services for Adolescents
- Fact Sheet on Reproductive Health: Adolescents & Young Adults
- Fact Sheet on Substance Use: Adolescents & Young Adults
- Fact Sheet on Suicide: Adolescents & Young Adults
- Fact Sheet on Unintentional Injury: Adolescents & Young Adults
- Fact Sheet on Violence: Adolescents & Young Adults

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