Study: More teens saying no to substances
by Melissa Jenco, News Content Editor

The rate of teens abstaining from alcohol, cigarettes and other substances is five times higher than it was four decades ago, according to a new study.

However, researchers fear those trends could change as more states legalize marijuana.


In 2014, 26% of high school seniors said they had never used alcohol, tobacco, marijuana or other substances, up from 5% in 1976, according to the study. During that time, abstinence from current use increased from 23% to 52%. Lifetime and current abstinence also grew among eighth- and 10th-graders.

Alcohol was the most common substance high school seniors tried throughout the years. In 1976, only 8% had abstained compared to 34% in 2014. The increase may be due in part to the national drinking age being raised to 21 in the mid-1980s, according to the study.

More teens are abstaining from cigarette smoking as well. In 2014, about 66% said they had never smoked compared to 25% in 1976, the study found.

“The Truth Campaign was remarkably successful in shifting public perception of tobacco from glamorous to repulsive,” authors wrote.

The data showed teens who were male, black, religious or came from a two-parent household were more likely to abstain from substance use in 2014. Teens also were more likely to abstain if they did well in school, worked fewer hours at a job or spent fewer nights going out.

"Strategies that engage young people in positive activities that have successfully reduced alcohol and tobacco use may be similarly used to support campaigns promoting abstinence from all substances," authors said.

Abstinence from marijuana has been relatively steady in recent years and only slightly higher than in 1976. Researchers expressed concern that increasing legalization could lead to increased use and said teens need more education on the dangers to their developing brains.

"Pediatricians have the opportunity and the credibility to deliver a generalized proactive prevention message that nonuse is best for adolescent health - a message that is simple to deliver and backed by our burgeoning knowledge of neuroscience and the special developmental vulnerability of adolescents to both acute and long-term morbidity and mortality associated with substance use," authors wrote.

Resources
- AAP policy "Substance Use Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment"
- AAP policy "Alcohol Use by Youth and Adolescents: A Pediatric Concern"
News Articles, Adolescent Health/Medicine, Smoking, Substance Abuse

- AAP policy "Clinical Practice Policy to Protect Children From Tobacco, Nicotine, and Tobacco Smoke"
- AAP policy "The Impact of Marijuana Policies on Youth: Clinical, Research, and Legal Update"
- Information for parents from HealthyChildren.org about marijuana
- Information for parents from HealthyChildren.org on talking to teens about drugs and alcohol
- AAP Julius B. Richmond Center for Excellence website
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
- Pediatrics research collection on marijuana