

COVID-19 Substance Use/Abuse, Teens & Health

The current vaping epidemic among teens and college-aged individuals hit us fast and hard. However, through awareness and education, parents, schools and communities have begun to curb the epidemic. Yet, maybe now even more than before, the use of vaping pens and e-cigarettes among teens and college-aged individuals remains a very serious concern.

A Stanford study conducted in May of 2020 that was recently published in the Journal of Adolescent Health found that teens and college-aged individuals, between the ages of 13 and 24, who had been tested for COVID-19 in May of 2020, and also vaped, were five times more likely to test positive for COVID-19 than those their age who did not vape.

The study further revealed that within that same age group, those who vaped and smoked cigarettes were seven times more likely to test positive for COVID-19 than those who did not vape or smoke cigarettes.

The study also indicates that teens and college-aged individuals who vaped were more likely to have respiratory symptoms, such as coughing and breathing issues, that are associated with COVID-19.

Dr. Halpern-Felsher, who was involved in the research study, said, "If you are a vaper, you are putting yourself at risk for COVID-19 and other lung disease."

And while the data for long term effects of COVID-19 remains largely unknown for adults and youth alike, we do know that some people who had COVID-19 and are now virus free continue to have mild to very serious health concerns related to the virus.

Unfortunately, the connection between COVID-19 and substance related concerns for youth does not start or end with vaping.

Months of social distancing and, in some cases, home isolation because of COVID-19, can be especially hard on anyone, maybe even more so on teens.

We know one of the top reported reasons teens experiment and/or use drugs is out of boredom. It is simply something to do to fill their time and satisfy their curiosity.

And with all of the cancellations surrounding school activities as well as summer athletics and the health mandates that closed malls, movie theaters, swimming pools, concert halls, etc., teens may have very well felt a level boredom they never had experienced before. As a result, parents and schools should remain on high alert for teens needing additional supports in addressing substance use

and abuse more so now than even before as we slowly move our way back to normalcy.

Additionally, we also know that many mental health disorders and illnesses begin to develop or emerge during the teen years. We further know, through a multitude of studies and research, that mental health disorders and illnesses are highly intertwined and co-occur in teens.

The stress, worry and the unknown caused by the COVID-19 can wear the best of us down, but teens may have an especially tough time coping mentally and emotionally.

Teens spend the majority of their time in school with friends, participating in activities and socializing with one another. And when COVID-19 hit, almost every aspect of their life was adversely interrupted.

They lost out on more than just in person school instruction time. And the more social and connected to extracurricular activities a teen was, the heavier their loss.

And so, some teens might feel or have felt very lonely and isolated from their friends. They might feel or have felt very anxious about all of the unknowns that surrounded them last spring and that are still swirling around at the start of this fall school year. They may even feel hopeless or angry about all of the changes and losses they endured because of the pandemic.

All of these possible feelings and happenings should serve as a serious reminder to parents and school personnel that these teens may need even more emotional and mental health supports and services in the coming months.

For additional resources and information on teen substance use/abuse and mental health concerns, please visit www.scipnebraska.com.

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