

Young athletes use fewer drugs, but more alcohol

By Genevra Pittman, Reuters Health
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NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - Teens who exercise and play team sports are less likely to be smokers or use marijuana and other drugs, according to a new study.

However, the results also showed that high school students on athletic teams drank more alcohol than their peers.

While the findings don't prove cause and effect, they could have important implications for preventing drug and alcohol abuse in young adults, the authors write in the journal *Addiction*.

Promoting exercise in young people and making sure that student athletes are targeted for alcohol prevention, for instance, would be important first steps in addressing the issue, said Yvonne Terry-McElrath, one of the study's authors from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

Still, she cautioned that the links found in the study "were not staggeringly large," and that encouraging exercise is "certainly not a cure for anything."

The researchers used data from a study sponsored by the National Institute on Drug Abuse that followed high school seniors through young adulthood with regular surveys.

Those surveys asked about recent use of alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs, as well as participation in athletics and general exercise.

The current report included data on close to 12,000 students, about half of whom filled out follow-up surveys until they were 25 or 26 years old.

At the first survey, students had drunk alcohol between one and five times, on average, in the previous month and smoked marijuana between zero and two times. The average senior smoked cigarettes not at all or less than one per day. About nine percent of students had used other illicit drugs in the previous month.

Students who participated in team sports or general exercise more often were less likely to use cigarettes, marijuana, and other illicit drugs as seniors. And those that upped their physical activity over the next few years also reported smoking and using drugs less often as time went on.

About 38 percent of teens who didn't exercise reported smoking cigarettes at some point in the past month, and 23 percent had smoked marijuana. That compared to 25 to 29 percent of frequent exercisers and athletes who had smoked cigarettes and 15 to 17 percent who smoked marijuana.

Being involved in team sports meant teens were more likely to drink frequently -- but that didn't extend to people who exercised, though not as part of a team.

About 45 percent of non-exercisers said they had drunk alcohol in the last month, which rose to 57 percent in those who regularly played a team sport.

In general, the authors also note, high school seniors who reported drinking more at the first survey were also the heavier drinkers throughout young adulthood.

It's not the first time a study has linked participation in team sports to drinking -- although it's not necessarily the case that playing sports causes a teen to drink more. Terry-McElrath said there are still many theories as to why these athletes tend to drink more than others.

Drinking may be an important social activity on some teams, and there may be peer pressure to drink in post-game environments. And, sports

are closely tied to the alcohol industry -- just consider all the beer advertisements during the Super Bowl, she said.

Especially in more competitive athletes, “their competitive spirit on the athletic field may translate over into drinking behaviors as well,” said Darren Mays, a researcher at Georgetown University Medical Center who has studied alcohol use in adolescent athletes.

Or it could be related to stress, said Mays, who did not participate in the new research.

“These are young people who are typically under pressure to perform athletically and academically (and) drinking might be a coping mechanism,” he told Reuters Health.

Young athletes should be sent the message that “being a competitor and being at the top of your game does not have to mean high alcohol consumption,” Terry-McElrath said -- and high school coaches should be educated about this issue as well, she added.

Nadra Lisha, a graduate student at the Keck School of Medicine of the University of Southern California who has also studied this association, said that people who exercise a lot and those that use alcohol might be so-called sensation-seekers who get a thrill from both activities.

“Drinking might not be as detrimental to their life, whereas smoking something -- it would be much harder to exercise the next day,” Lisha, who was not involved in the current study, told Reuters Health.

Terry-McElrath agreed. “Individuals who tend to be high drug-users often can’t keep up in a really competitive environment,” she said. Also, they’re likely to get kicked off of teams that do drug testing, she added.

She said the results can be seen as “encouraging” for the possibility of both treating and preventing drug use in young people.

“If we can encourage an enjoyment in general exercise, we may be able to see a lowering of participation in drug use,” she said. “It’s at least a starting point.”

SOURCE: bit.ly/kEOz84 Addiction, online May 11, 2011.