Tobacco, Alcohol, and Other Drugs: The Role of the Pediatrician in Prevention, Identification, and Management of Substance Abuse
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ABSTRACT. Substance abuse remains a major public health concern, and pediatricians are uniquely positioned to assist their patients and families with its prevention, detection, and treatment. The American Academy of Pediatrics has highlighted the importance of such issues in a variety of ways, including its guidelines for preventive services. The harmful consequences of tobacco, alcohol, and other drug use are a concern of medical professionals who care for infants, children, adolescents, and young adults. Thus, pediatricians should include discussion of substance abuse as a part of routine health care, starting with the prenatal visit, and as part of ongoing anticipatory guidance. Knowledge of the nature and extent of the consequences of tobacco, alcohol, and other drug use as well as the physical, psychological, and social consequences is essential for pediatricians. Pediatricians should incorporate substance-abuse prevention into daily practice, acquire the skills necessary to identify young people at risk of substance abuse, and provide or facilitate assessment, intervention, and treatment as necessary. Pediatrics 2005;115:816–821; tobacco, alcohol, drugs, substance abuse.

ABBREVIATION. AAP, American Academy of Pediatrics.

PERVERSIVENESS OF DRUG USE

In a recent public opinion poll of Americans’ views of the top 2 or 3 problems facing adolescents today, 67% identified drugs or drug abuse, 13% identified alcohol abuse, and 6% identified smoking. In the same poll, a question assessing Americans’ views of the seriousness of 36 health problems revealed that drug abuse (82%) was rated higher than cancer (78%), followed by drunk driving (75%), smoking (68%), and alcohol abuse (65%).

The pattern of substance abuse among adolescents has changed significantly during the past 35 years. Before the late 1960s, it was predominantly adults who were abusing alcohol and other psychoactive drugs, including tobacco. Beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, substance abuse became widespread among adolescents and, more recently, among preadolescents. Alcohol and tobacco as well as opiates, cocaine, amphetamines, barbiturates, marijuana, hallucinogens, anabolic steroids, and prescription and nonprescription medications and inhalants (volatile substances) are used and abused by many adolescents and a growing number of preadolescents. Tobacco use in these groups represents a significant health threat and is associated with an increased likelihood of future use of marijuana and other illicit drugs. In Healthy People 2010, multiple national goals have been established to decrease child and adolescent substance use (Table 1).

Three periodic surveys track national trends in use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs by adolescents: (1) the annual Monitoring the Future Study of students in grades 8, 10, and 12; (2) the biannual Youth Risk Behavior Survey of students in grades 9 through 12; and (3) the annual National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (renamed in 2003 to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health), in which computer-assisted interviewing is conducted in the home for residents 12 years and older. In reviewing survey data and published reports, pediatricians should be aware that adolescent substance abuse may be reported as lifetime, annual, 30-day, 2-week, or daily.

Alcohol and tobacco use often begins in adolescence or earlier. Data analysis from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health demonstrates that adolescents who smoke or drink experience immediate negative health consequences and report poorer health during adolescence than those who do not. Alcohol is involved in more than one third of the deaths attributable to unintentional injury, homicide, and suicide, which together account for 76% of mortality in the 15- to 19-year age group. By the end of high school, 77% of students have tried alcohol, and 46% have done so by eighth grade. More than half (58%) of 12th-grade students and one fifth (20%) of 8th-grade students report having been drunk at least once in their life. Tobacco is associated with the 5 leading causes of death in adult Americans, accounting for 435 000 deaths annually. By the 12th grade, 54% of American youth have tried cigarettes and 24% are current smokers. Alcohol and tobacco are often referred to as licit (or lawful) drugs, but in the United States the legal age for use of alcohol remains 21 years or older, and the legal minimum age for purchase of tobacco remains 18 years.