

SUMMER 2012



## Special points of interest:

- Research of marijuana is needed to determine safe doses for patients of all ages; to test for possible side effects that a doctor needs to monitor; and to design a formula that will allow the patient to receive the drug without the harmful effects of smoking.
- Parents who use harm-reducing strategies such as allowing their high school teens to drink under their supervision, have a higher risk of those teens getting drunk outside of the home without parental permission than teens who are not allowed to drink at home.

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**"TODAY'S HEALTHY CHOICES ARE TOMORROW'S HEALTHY OUTCOMES"**

## Should We Consider Marijuana to be Medicine?

Nearly one in 10 teenagers smoke marijuana at least 20 times a month, according to the Partnership at Drugfree.org. The Partnership Attitude Tracking Study, released in late April, showed that past-month use of marijuana rose from 19 percent in 2008, to 27 percent last year in 2011.

Since Massachusetts decriminalized marijuana in 2008, our state has seen a rise in youth marijuana rates. According to the 2009 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 35.2% of our 12<sup>th</sup> grade students use marijuana regularly compared to the national average of 24.6% of 12 grade students.

Why are we seeing this rise in teen marijuana use? Surveys show that teen perception of harm from marijuana use has been dropping since states have begun legalizing the

“medical use” of marijuana. The general perception is that medicines are safe, therefore if some states consider marijuana to be medicine, then marijuana must be safe.

*It is unlikely that the American Medical Association will ever pass smoking marijuana as medicine because smoking is unhealthy.*

But unlike all the other prescription medicines and over-the-counter medications in this country, marijuana has never been passed by the Federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA). All the drugs in our family medicine

cabinets had to pass a very strict set of FDA standards to ensure public safety. But marijuana has not yet been tested by the FDA.

The active ingredient in the marijuana plant is delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). Some people believe that it helps cancer patients deal with the nausea and loss of appetite caused by chemotherapy; the pressure inside the eye caused by glaucoma; the pain of migraine headaches and other pain. Although there has not been enough research to support this, some states have made marijuana easily available by legalizing its use as “medicinal”.

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## Preventing Heavy College Drinking

According to researchers at Penn State University, the first few weeks of college are a critical time in shaping students' drinking habits. These researchers have designed a campaign that may help prevent college students from becoming heavy drinkers.

The first semester is considered a very important time to prevent heavy drinking because previous studies have shown that college freshmen drink heavily regardless of whether or not they started drinking in high school. In *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, research was published that 8 percent of incoming freshmen were heavy drinkers the summer before starting college. Surveys of the same students again during the fall semester found 28 percent of those freshmen now drank heavily.

"Research shows there is a spike in alcohol-related consequences that occur in the first few weeks of the semester, especially with college freshmen," said Michael J. Cleveland, research associate at the Prevention Research Center and the Methodology Center. "If you can buffer that and get beyond that point and safely navigate through that passage, you reduce the risk of later problems occurring."

The Penn State study included a parent-based intervention that involved parents of incoming freshmen receiving a 35-page handbook outlining how to discuss the issue of alcohol. Parents were asked to complete tasks relating to conversations about alcohol with their students.

Students who were heavy drinkers during the summer before college were less likely to drink heavily in the first semester of college if they received the parent intervention compared to students not receiving the parent intervention.

There has been some debate regarding whether parents of high school students should teach their children responsible use of alcohol to prepare them for college or whether they should maintain a zero-tolerance policy. Numerous research studies show us that maintaining strict rules and consequences about underage drinking is most protective against teen alcohol use.

Parents who use harm-reducing strategies such as allowing their high school teens to drink under their supervision, have a higher risk of those teens getting drunk outside of the home without parental permission than teens who are not allowed to drink at home.

Also, allowing your teen to experience alcohol in high school with parent supervision does not reduce alcohol use at college. Studies of college freshman show that heavy drinking occurs in freshman year regardless of whether they started drinking alcohol in high school.

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*Harm-reduction messages from parents such as "drinking responsibly" were heard by students most likely to drink heavily. These students were more likely to drink heavily than the even the students who receive "mixed messages" or students who received no message at all.*

Female high school students are more likely than male high school students to perceive self-medicating as reasons for teen drug use, according to a national survey of high school students conducted by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America.

Female students feel that teens use drugs to deal with the pressures of school, problems at home and to help themselves feel better about themselves. In contrast, male students were more likely to claim that having fun and relaxing as reasons for drug use.

According to the Partnership President, Steve Pasierb, “Parents can help prevent alcohol and drug abuse by recognizing and addressing their daughters’ worries and stresses, by supporting her positive decisions and by taking immediate action if they suspect or know she has been experimenting.”

As a parent of three daughters, any

study citing reasons for teen drug use is important to me. We all deal with stress everyday, but most of us do not turn to pills in a medicine cabinet or a liquor bottle to feel better. We can learn from this study and then take steps to guide our teenagers to make healthy choices to relieve stress.

- 1) Just like writing in a diary, teens can relieve stress by writing in a journal. It may help to write about things that are bothering them. Write for 10 to 15 minutes a day about stressful events. Write what types of things cause the stress.
- 2) Teens should take time to do the things they enjoy. When we are stressed, we usually do not have time for a hobby. But making time for the things that make us happy can relieve stress.
- 3) Exercise is always a healthy choice for

stress relief. Walking, yoga, Pilates and Tai Chi all encourage deep breaths and relaxation.

- 4) Get plenty of rest. Most teens do not get the 9-1/2 to 10 hours of sleep that is recommended for them. Some pediatricians suggest “power naps” to teens.

In general, parents can help limit stress by limiting the number of activities for their teens. And don’t forget to appreciate them. Teens need to know that we cherish and admire them for who they are, not for their grades and achievements.

For more information, visit [www.drugfree.org](http://www.drugfree.org).

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**HEALTHY OUTCOMES**

**SPRING 2012  
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Recently a study was published in the *Journal for Studies of Alcohol and Drugs*. The sample consisted of 585 second-year students from a large university in the northeastern United States. Participants completed surveys to assess their perceptions of parental alcohol-related messages and their own alcohol use. The data indicated that students who heard zero-tolerance messages from their parents were least likely to drink heavily.

Harm-reduction messages from parents such as “drinking responsibly” were heard by students most likely to drink heavily. These students were more likely to drink heavily than the even the students who received “mixed messages” or students who received no message at all.

Their conclusion was that a zero-tolerance approach by parents during high school was associated with safer outcomes than other messages, even if students were already using alcohol.

[www.GetHealthyOutcomes.org](http://www.GetHealthyOutcomes.org)

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**Should We Consider Marijuana to be Medicine? (continued from page 1)**

In those states that have “medical” marijuana, the teen use of marijuana increased, pot shops sell marijuana instead of pharmacies because marijuana is still illegal at a federal level; pot shops sell marijuana, hash, pipes, bongs and marijuana-laced food and candy; crime rates have increased in the neighborhoods with pot shops; students bring their marijuana to school when they need their “medicine” during the school day; and 95% of medical marijuana card holders do not have cancer, glaucoma or other serious illness.

The American Medical Association (AMA) has released a formal statement that more research on the cannabis plant must happen before it will consider marijuana as a medicine. Research is needed in order to determine which chemicals in cannabis are effective for specific ailments; to determine safe doses for patients of all ages; to test for possible side effects that a doctor needs to monitor; and to design a formula that will allow the patient to receive the drug without the harmful effects of smoking. It is unlikely that the AMA will ever pass smoking marijuana as medicine because smoking is unhealthy. But the drug can be safely dosed in the form of a pill, transdermal patch or even an oral spray.

All medications that we bring into our homes, for our families should be tested, fulfill the standards of the FDA and recommended by the AMA. If a drug currently in our medicine cabinets was discovered to be untested for safety and effectiveness, we would not tolerate it. Marijuana should be no exception.