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Teens, Young Adults Driving Prescription Drug Abuse Increase, Study Finds

Teenagers and young adults are abusing prescription painkillers at a rate 40 percent higher than what would be expected for their age group, a new study finds.

The findings reinforce concerns by law enforcement and medical experts that the wide availability of painkillers is dangerous for adolescents, according to The Denver Post.

Researchers at the University of Colorado Denver evaluated data from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, and found Americans ages 15 to 27 are driving the prescription drug abuse epidemic, the article notes.

"Prescription drug use is the next big epidemic," lead researcher Richard Miech, Ph.D., said in a news release. "Everyone in this field has recognized that there is a big increase in the abuse of nonmedical analgesics but our study shows that it is accelerating among today's generation of adolescents."

The study notes that the total number of hydrocodone and oxycodone products prescribed legally in the U.S. increased more than fourfold, from about 40 million in 1991, to nearly 180 million in 2007.

This increase in painkiller availability makes it easier for teens to start using the drugs than in the past, because more homes have prescription painkillers in their medicine cabinets, the researchers said. "While most people recognize the dangers of leaving a loaded gun lying around the house, what few people realize is that far more people die as a result of unsecured prescription medications," Miech said.

The study appears in the Journal of Adolescent Health.

Are you a teen or a parent concerned about your child's use – abuse – of alcohol and other drugs in your life? Click here to take NCADD's Self-Test for Teenagers.