

Athletes on performance enhancers more likely to abuse alcohol, other drugs

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College athletes who use performance-enhancing substances may be at heightened risk of misusing alcohol and using recreational drugs as well, according to new research in the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*.

The study, of 234 male [athletes](#) at one university, found that those who used performance enhancers -- ranging from steroids to stimulants to weight-loss supplements -- were more likely to admit to heavy drinking and using drugs like marijuana and cocaine.

Moreover, they also had elevated rates of alcohol- and drug-related problems, such as missing classes, failing tests or getting into fights.

The implication is that many athletes are not only experimenting with recreational drugs and alcohol, but suffering consequences as well, says study co-author Dr. Robert J. Pandina, director of the Center of Alcohol Studies at Rutgers University in Piscataway, New Jersey.

Until now, it had been unclear whether college athletes who use performance enhancers might have any higher risk of misusing other substances. On one hand, Pandina explained, many athletes might avoid habits that could threaten their performance on the field. On the other, athletes drawn to performance-enhancing substances might have certain traits -- such as a propensity toward "sensation seeking" -- that make the misuse of alcohol or other drugs more likely.

In their study, the researchers, led by Dr. Jennifer F. Buckman, assistant research professor at the Center of Alcohol Studies, found that nearly one third of the athletes acknowledged using a performance-enhancing substance in the past year. The list included banned substances like steroids, creatine, "Andro," stimulants and weight-loss aids.

As a group, athletes who used performance-enhancing substances reported higher rates of drug and alcohol use. Seventy percent said they had used marijuana and one third admitted to cocaine use, versus 22 percent and 3 percent of athletes who did not use performance enhancers. They also had higher rates of smoking, binge drinking and prescription-drug misuse.

The results also hint at some reasons for the elevated rates of drug and alcohol use. Athletes who used performance enhancers were more likely than nonusers to be natural sensation seekers -- a desire to have new and varied experiences -- but they were also more likely to say they used drugs or alcohol specifically to cope with stress and anxiety.

This, Pandina says, suggest that these athletes often see a "utilitarian value" to using recreational drugs. "They are using them to cope with the problems of day-to-day living."

Pandina points out that although many college students are under pressure, athletes -- particularly those at the most competitive schools -- may face additional stress. He adds that while testing athletes for drugs helps, it is not enough by itself; understanding why some turn to drugs is also key.

"This really says that we have to focus on the motivations for athletes' substance use," Pandina says, "and make them aware of the consequences that are likely to come of it."

Future studies, according to Pandina, should look at whether the same patterns are seen among female athletes and those at colleges with less-competitive sports programs. The athletes in this study came from a large, NCAA Division I university, where performance pressure could be particularly high.

More information: Buckman J. F., Yusko, D. A., White, H. R., & Pandina, R. J. (November 2009) Risk profile of male college athletes who use performance-enhancing substances. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 70, 919-923.

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