

Painkillers for teen athletes won't spur addiction: study

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(HealthDay)—Teenage athletes are less likely to abuse prescription

painkillers than kids who don't play sports or exercise, a new study finds.

The study results run counter to some research in recent years detailing concerns about injured teen athletes abusing opioid painkillers prescribed by doctors and then moving on to use heroin.

Dr. Wilson Compton, deputy director of the U.S. National Institute on Drug Abuse, said he was "surprised" by the findings. He said, "A key risk (for teenage athletes) is a desire to please and for acceptance. But this study shows overall rates (of use) are declining."

For the study, University of Michigan researchers examined data from nearly 192,000 students in 8th and 10th grade who participated in a federally funded study between 1997 and 2014. Over these years, doctors wrote many more opioid painkiller prescriptions for children and teens, and nonmedical use of opioids increased sharply as well.

At roughly the same time, overdose deaths involving opioids such as Vicodin, OxyContin, Percocet and heroin nearly quadrupled in the United States, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

However, the study results suggest that daily participation in sports and exercise may actually serve as a protective factor with respect to painkiller and [heroin abuse](#), said report co-author Philip Veliz. He is with the university's Institute for Social Research.

Even kids who participated in sports just once a week had lower odds of reporting any painkiller or heroin abuse, the study found.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that prescribing opioids to teens after a [sports injury](#) may lead some of them to become heroin addicts, Veliz explained. It's said these kids become addicted to their painkillers and

eventually resort to heroin, which is also an opioid, because it's cheaper and easier to obtain.

While the narratives are compelling, Veliz said, no large-scale studies have assessed whether abuse of recommended painkillers is actually leading to an "epidemic" of heroin use among teens who frequently engage in sports and exercise.

On the contrary, this new study suggests there may be "positive social connections embedded in sports that can deter youth from serious types of illicit substance use," such as heroin or cocaine, he said.

But some types of intense contact sports place teens "at greater risk" for painkiller abuse, Veliz noted. More research is needed into why this may be the case, he said.

For instance, other research has suggested that participation in wrestling or football may result in higher degrees of painkiller abuse. Veliz acknowledged that the chance of severe injury is greater in those sports than in other sports, such as baseball. He said he hopes to search for more definitive answers.

Overall, the new study found a decline in painkiller abuse by young athletes as well as non-athletes. Veliz and Compton agreed that greater awareness by parents and youngsters has helped lead to this decline.

"Maybe this is a sign that people are being more vigilant" about their children's use of painkillers, Veliz said.

The study found that more than half of the students reported involvement in sports and exercise almost daily the previous year. Almost two out of five participated weekly at most, while about 8 percent reported no athletics or exercise.

Among the daily participants, nonmedical use of opioids declined from about 9 percent in 1997 to less than 5 percent in 2014. Heroin use fell from about 2 percent to less than 1 percent in that period, the study revealed.

The media's focus on a rise of painkiller abuse by college students and young adults has also hammered at the dangers of opioid use by teens, Veliz said. Public messages on television, the internet and at schools have played a role as well, he said.

However, Compton said, painkiller abuse remains a rising problem among college students and young adults. Primarily, this is the result of less supervision by adults, the pressure to succeed at college and in the workplace, and the easy availability of such drugs on the streets, he noted.

"The young people are going in different directions" on this issue, Compton said.

While the new report assures that sports and regular exercise don't lead to painkiller abuse, Veliz recommended more study on sports injury and pain management. Such studies help expand knowledge of the risks and benefits of teenage [sports](#) participation, he said.

The study findings were published online July 25 in the journal *Pediatrics*.

More information: The U.S. National Institute on Drug Abuse outlines signs of [drug abuse and addiction](#).

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