



Review Article

## Substance abuse influencing sexual behavior and sexual health among youth

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### Abstract

Substance use among youth is on the rise, and it is associated with risky sexual behavior making them more susceptible to sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and unwanted pregnancies. Substance use usually starts during adolescence due to various factors like peer pressure, history of substance use in the family, role modeling from media, etc. Due to their psychopharmacological effects, various substances interfere with sexual arousal, its functioning, or pleasure. In most cases of sexual abuse, it is seen that either the victim or the perpetrator is under the influence of a substance. Thus, extensive knowledge about the relationship between substance use and risky sexual behavior will enable healthcare providers to deliver better services.

**Keywords:** Substance abuse, Addiction, Sexual behavior, Sexual health, Youth

### Introduction

Substance abuse is a growing problem among the youth. National Youth Policy of 2014 defines youth as the age group of 15-29 years, and 27.5% of the total population

belongs to this age group (Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports, 2014). Research shows that most adults who have substance use disorder initiated the habit during their youth (Jordan & Anderson, 2017). Substance abuse is also associated with risky sexual behaviors such as having multiple sex partners, not using contraceptives like condom, and getting pregnant before the age of 15, making this group highly vulnerable to unwanted pregnancy, HIV, and other sexually transmitted diseases (Clayton et al., 2016; Cavazos et al., 2012). In India, a study of high-risk groups such as female commercial sex workers, their clients, and men having sex

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with men revealed a growing pattern of alcohol use (at least once a week) (WHO, 2005).

Evidence from research indicates a growing trend of premarital sex in young men and women. In developing regions, approximately 12 million girls of age 15-19 years become pregnant every year, and almost 57% of them give birth. The babies born to adolescents are at high risk of having low birth weight, pre term delivery, and severe neonatal complications (WHO, 2015; 2021). In addition, approximately eight lakh births occur to adolescent girls less than 15 years of age (Darroch et al., 2016; UNFPA, 2015).

### **Youth and sexuality**

In India, premarital and unsafe sexual behavior among young individuals is growing (Joshi & Chauhan, 2011). The hormonal changes during puberty lead to various intensified sexual behavior and experimentation among them. They have increased interest in sexual materials and information. Teenage sexuality has limited social acceptance, so it restricts the opportunities of young people to openly talk and discuss about sex (West, 1999). They tend to use sexual words and discuss sexual acts, particularly with their peers. Curiosity about relationships and sexual behavior, seeking self-pleasure, and masturbation are pervasive among them. By the time they attain adolescence, about one-third of them are already sexually active (West, 1999).

### **Relationship of substance abuse and sexual behavior**

The existence of a relationship between substance use and sexual behavior is very evident. The substance is a psychoactive agent, and its use enhances or inhibits sexual functioning, sexual pleasure, and arousal. The substance users have less self-control,

which might prevent them from using contraceptives like condom or having sex with potentially risky partners. When individuals engage in substance abuse, there is often a reduction in inhibitions which results in casual sexual activity with strangers or friends with whom they would not ordinarily become intimate (Calsyn et al., 2010).

Different substance users perceive sexual thoughts differently. Alcohol intoxication impairs condom use negotiation skills putting the youth at higher risk of Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs). Alcohol and oral tobacco users are having a higher vulnerability to Human Immunodeficiency Virus /Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS). Studies show that ignorance regarding STDs and non-usage of condoms was higher among youth less than 25 years of age (Akbar et al., 2015).

Masturbation is reported to be higher among adolescents who consume stimulants than alcohol. Gamma hydroxybutyrate (GHB) users have more enhancement in sexual domains than persons using alcohol, sedatives, and stimulants (Meine et al., 2018). They also have multiple sexual partners and have a higher frequency of sexual encounters.

The number of sexual abuse cases is increasing daily. College campuses are a hub of alcohol-related sexual assaults, and alcohol consumption is a significant risk factor for rape in this population (Abbey, 2002). Every year approximately 1 in 20 college girls experience sexual assault (Mayberry et al., 2009). Sexual harassment is not only recorded when under the influence of drugs or alcohol, but certain victims of sexual assault also use drugs or alcohol to deal with traumatic stress, unwanted anxiety, or depression. According to some reports,

sexual assault victims are 13 times more likely to abuse alcohol and 26 times more likely to abuse drugs than non-victims (Meine et al., 2018).

### **Factors associated with substance use/abuse**

The social learning process of imitating the observed behavior plays a vital role in developing attitude and behavior to initiate substance abuse. Various factors are associated with substance use/abuse. The most vital is the social influence like peer pressure, substance use by siblings or family members, which promote experimentation and ignite the use or abuse of the substance (Loke & Mak, 2013). The social organizations like schools and colleges are the familiar places where the adolescent experience peer pressure. In addition, the chance of engagement with substance is reported to be higher among academically poor students (Fletcher et al., 2008).

Genetics, or heredity, plays a vital role in the development of substance abuse disorder. Various factors like poor parenting, no family bonding, conflict in the family contribute to the development of such behaviors (Mayberry et al., 2009).

Media showing substance use by celebrities on various platforms like television, movies, advertisements, etc., is also one of the most significant influencers for substance use among youth. They generally idolize the roles played onscreen by the performers. Studies show that teens spend almost 9 hours a day online, on the phone, playing games, or watching television which exposes them more to the risk (Villani, 2001).

### **Way forward to overcome**

The adolescent period is a crucial period where young individuals easily get fascinated to indulge in risky behaviors like smoking,

alcohol or drug use, and sexual activity without sufficient knowledge of prevention and coping mechanisms (Sharma, 2012).

Early initiation of sexual activity, higher prevalence of unprotected sex as first sexual experience, use of the substance, and interrelation among adolescents indicate dangerous effects. All these factors impose a dire need to address the issue and adopt an integrated approach at all levels of prevention. Short term and long term awareness and behaviour change is an essential component across all the dimensions of health and well being. Adolescents must be aware of the ill effects of alcohol and other substance abuse (Sharma & Vishwakarma, 2020).

It is essential for health care providers to have sufficient awareness of the connection between drug abuse and risky sexual behavior. This expertise can be put to good use in terms of preventing and treating possible health risks. It will also allow patients to be educated about their sexual health and drug use.

Parents and family members play an essential part as well. Parental disapproval of premarital sexual practices and parental connectedness all seem to discourage or postpone premarital sexual initiation in young people.

### **Sex education**

The importance of sex education for adolescents in schools is acknowledged in National Education Policy, 2016 as a wellbeing measure (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2016). Inadequate and improper knowledge regarding sex can be dangerous. Adolescents should be aware of human sexuality in a formal platform by educators to prevent potential health hazards. Though there is also a second school

of thought in this regard, where sex education is viewed as hostile to Indian culture. It advocates that sex education may provoke sexual thoughts among children and adolescents, which can be hazardous to them (Khubachandani et al., 2014).

Adolescent friendly health clinic (AFHC) is one of the major components in Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram. This karyakram highlighted the need for strengthening AFHC. These facility-based sexual health clinics will offer an opportunity to look into holistic health care, mainly addiction and sexual health concerns of adolescents. Various issues like nutrition, substance abuse, injury, violence, and non-communicable diseases, including mental health, are addressed in these clinics (National Health Mission, 2021).

### **Prevention of substance abuse**

It should include intervention at the individual, family, and community levels. At the individual level, educating youth about the harmful effects of various substance use and building strong willingness, inculcating good moral values and self-control will promote positive health and help in avoiding the use of substances.

Family plays an important role in preventing substance abuse. They can closely monitor for the initiation of any substance use, the peer group with whom their ward mingles more, and try to nurture healthy behaviors. Family members can give a friendly and open environment to the youth to discuss any concern regarding sexual health and substance use (Lochman & Steenhoven, 2002).

School-based interventions are a crucial component in the prevention of substance abuse. Students should be taught to lead a healthy way of living by teaching life skills. In

addition, school administrators and teachers need to support the government by ensuring 100 percent compliance to the Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act (COTPA) 2003. COTPA Act is helpful in the reduction of the prevalence of substance abuse and tobacco-free educational institutions (Pradhan et al., 2020).

### **Conclusion**

The association between substance abuse and sexual behaviors among youth is a significant concern in the current era, especially in the Indian context. A variety of sexual risk behaviors and sexual health outcomes are associated with substance abuse. Adolescent friendly health clinics (AFHCs) should be utilized to address substance abuse issues among adolescents and youths. School health programs promote social and emotional competence, peer-led to drug and alcohol resistance programs and parenting skills training for parents will also work to some extent helping to resolve substance abuse and related sexual health problems.

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