

CESAR BRIEFING

Relationship of Tobacco Use to Alcohol and Illicit Drug Use

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How many Marylanders use tobacco?

- More than 80,000 Maryland youth (18% of those under 18 years of age) and 780,000 Maryland adults (20%) report current (i.e., past month) use of some form of tobacco.¹
- The *National Survey on Drug Use and Health* (NSDUH) estimates that 24% of Marylanders are current cigarette smokers (28% are current users of any tobacco products). The rate is highest for young adults (42% of 18 to 25 year-olds). NSDUH also estimates that 14% of Maryland adolescents (aged 12 to 17) are current smokers and 16% are current users of any type of tobacco. These rates are similar to NSDUH's national estimates.²
- Tobacco use among Maryland 12th graders has declined over the past decade, according to the *Maryland Adolescent Survey*.³ In 2002, an estimated 20% of 12th graders were current cigarette smokers, down from 32% in 1992. Similarly, current use of smokeless tobacco by 12th graders declined from 8% in 1992 to 3% in 2002. Declines in tobacco use among adolescents have also been observed on the national level.^{4, 5}

Is there a connection between the use of tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs?

A strong relationship between tobacco use and alcohol and illicit drug use has been demonstrated among both youth and adults in the NSDUH and its predecessor the *National Household Survey of Drug Abuse*. Across all ages, current cigarette smokers are more likely than non-smokers to report use of other tobacco products, alcohol, and illicit drugs.

- Compared with non-smokers, cigarette smokers have higher rates of current binge drinking (43.1% vs. 15.8%), current heavy alcohol use (15.9% vs. 3.5%), and current illicit drug use (19.5% vs. 4.4%).⁶
- Among adolescents, the rate of current illicit drug use is about 8 times higher for smokers (48.1%) than for non-smokers (6.2%).⁷
- Illicit drug users are more likely than nonusers to smoke. An estimated 71% of current illicit drug users are also current smokers, compared with 29% of nonusers. Current illicit drug users are approximately three times more likely than nonusers to be current smokers, and the likelihood of being a smoker increases with the amount of illicit drugs used.⁸

Is tobacco a gateway drug?

The "gateway hypothesis" suggests that substance use occurs in a progression through several stages beginning with alcohol and tobacco, later progressing to marijuana, and then to cocaine and other harder illicit drugs. **Participation in one stage of substance use places one at risk for progression to the next stage, but that progression is not inevitable or certain.** In fact, most youth who use tobacco and alcohol do not progress to marijuana or other drugs, but most heavy drug users started out using tobacco and alcohol. Numerous studies have supported and refined the ideas underlying the gateway hypothesis, but a causal connection has not yet been established.⁹ A selection of related findings follows.

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- Younger onset of use and greater frequency of use are both important factors that predict later progression to other substances. This has been demonstrated for the transition from alcohol and tobacco to marijuana, and from marijuana to other illicit drugs.¹⁰
- In one study of 12 to 25 year-olds, “users of alcohol or tobacco were approximately three times more likely than nonusers to have an opportunity to try marijuana,”¹¹ and seven times more likely to actually try marijuana when the opportunity occurred. Similarly, experience with marijuana, alcohol, and tobacco was associated with an increased likelihood of having an opportunity to use cocaine and of actually trying it.¹²
- The likelihood of progressing from one substance to the next varies across generations as social norms change. Youth in the late 1990s have been more likely than previous generations to progress from tobacco and alcohol use to marijuana use. However, young marijuana users in recent years seem to progress to harder drugs somewhat less frequently than their counterparts did in the past.¹³

¹ Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. (September 2003). *Monitoring changing tobacco use behaviors in Maryland: A report on the fiscal year 2001 and 2003 Maryland tobacco surveys*. Baltimore: Cigarette Restitution Fund’s Tobacco Use Cessation and Prevention Program. On-line document accessed February 12, 2004, at <http://fha.state.md.us/crfp/pdf/Fall2003DataReport.pdf>.

² Wright, D. (2003). *State estimates of substance use from the 2001 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse: Volume I. findings* (DHHS Publication No. SMA 03-3775, NHSDA Series H-19). Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Office of Applied Studies. On-line document accessed February 11, 2004, at <http://www.samhsa.gov/oas/nhsda/2k1State/PDF/2k1SAEv1.pdf>.

³ Maryland State Department of Education. (August 2003). *2002 Maryland adolescent survey*. Baltimore: Division of Compensatory Education and Support Services; Division of Planning, Results, and Information Management.

⁴ Johnston, L. D., O’Malley, P. M., & Bachman, J. G. (2003). *Monitoring the Future national survey results on drug use, 1975-2002. Volume I: Secondary school students*. (NIH Publication No. 03-5375). Bethesda, MD: National Institute on Drug Abuse.

⁵ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA]. (2003). *Results from the 2002 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National findings* (Office of Applied Studies, NHSDA Series H-22, DHHS Publication No. SMA 03-3836). Rockville, MD. On-line document accessed February 11, 2004, at <http://www.samhsa.gov/oas/nhsda/2k2nsduh/2k2SoFW.pdf>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Richter, K.P., Ahluwalia, H.K., Mosier, M.C., Nazir, N., & Ahluwalia, J.S. (2002). A population-based study of cigarette smoking among illicit drug users in the United States. *Addiction*. Jul;97(7):861-9.

⁹ Kandel, Denise. (2002). *Stages and pathways of drug involvement*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁰ Merrill, Jeffrey C; Kleber, Herbert D; Shwarz, Michael; et al. (1999). Cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana, other risk behaviors, and American youth. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* 56(3), 205-212.

¹¹ Wagner, Fernando A; Anthony, James C (2002). Into the world of illegal drug use: exposure opportunity and other mechanisms linking the use of alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, and cocaine. *American Journal of Epidemiology* 155(10), 918-925.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Golub, A; Johnson, BD (2001). Variation in youthful risks of progression from alcohol and tobacco to marijuana and to hard drugs across generations. *American Journal of Public Health*. 91(2), 225-232.