

More teens abusing medications, survey shows

By Christopher Lee

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WASHINGTON | Federal officials are concerned that teenagers are abusing prescription medications and over-the-counter cold remedies even as their overall illegal drug use continued a decade-long decline in 2006, according to a government survey released Thursday.

While illegal drug use by teenagers has fallen 23 percent since 2001, their use of prescription narcotics, tranquilizers and other medicines remains at relatively high levels, government investigators said.

What's more, researchers for the first time asked whether teens were using cough or cold medicines to get high and found reason for concern there, too. Such over-the-counter medicines often contain the cough suppressant dextromethorphan, which alters mood and consciousness when consumed in high doses and can cause brain damage or even death, officials said.

About 1 in 14 12th-graders, or 7 percent, said they had taken such medicines to get high in the last year. Among eighth-graders, the figure was 1 in 25, about 4 percent.

"This is now an area of drug abuse that we need to pay more attention to," said Lloyd Johnston, the University of Michigan researcher who led the annual "Monitoring the Future" survey for the federal government.

Prescription drugs also were a problem. After rising steadily

since 2002, the percent of 12th-graders who said they had used the highly addictive painkiller OxyContin in the past year fell from 5.5 percent to 4.3 percent, a figure still considered unacceptably high by officials. Use of another popular narcotic, Vicodin, more or less has held steady since 2002, with 9.7 of 12th-graders, 7 percent of 10th-graders and 3 percent of eighth-graders saying they had used it to get high within the last year.

"If there is one thing that every adult can do today to help protect young people against prescription drugs," said John Walters, director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, "it is go to your medicine cabinet, take those prescription drugs you are finished using and throw them away. If you have teens in your house, remove this hazard today."

Despite such concerns, Walters said the overall news from the survey was good, showing continued long-term declines in teenagers' use of marijuana and alcohol.

For instance, about 32 percent of high school seniors said they had used marijuana in the last year, the lowest figure since about 31 percent said so in 1994.

Regarding drinking, about 30 percent of 12th-graders said they had been drunk in the month before taking the survey, down from a 15-year high of 34 percent in 1997. Among eighth-graders, about 6 percent said they had been drunk in the last month, compared to about 10 percent in 1996.