

More teens report abusing prescription drugs

The government study contains good news on smoking, illicit drugs.

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — America's teens are smoking less and popping pain pills more.

Nearly one in 10 high school seniors tried prescription painkillers last year, even as their generation continued turning away, at least slightly, from smoking and many other drugs.

The decline in illicit drug use by teens was modest, but continued a trend, according to the government's annual study of drug use by eighth-, 10th- and 12th-graders.

And, while teen cigarette smoking fell to its lowest level since the survey began, eighth-graders showed their

first increase since 1996 in smoking in the month before the survey.

The survey of nearly 50,000 teens across the country found that 21.4 percent of eighth-graders had used some illicit drug in their life, down from 21.5 percent a year earlier. For 10th graders it was 38.2 percent, down from 39.8 percent, and the figure for 12th graders was 50.4 percent, down from 51.1 percent.

Dr. Nora Volkow, director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, called that continuing decline "quite remarkable news." But, she told a briefing where the report was made public, abuse of prescription drugs by teens is a growing problem.

Use of the painkiller OxyContin grew from 4 percent to 5.5 percent of high school seniors from 2002 to 2005,

she said, and their use of Vicodin has been consistently over 9 percent, clocking in at 9.5 percent in 2005.

Only marijuana topped prescription drugs in teen use, she said, and that has been declining over time. For 2005, 44.8 percent of 12th graders said they had used marijuana at some time in their lives, down 0.9 percentage points from 2004. The total was 34.1 percent for 10th-graders, down 1 point. The 16.5 percent among eighth-graders was up 0.2 points, ending a steady decline since 1996.

Study director Lloyd Johnston of the University of Michigan, noting that eighth-graders had also ended their declines in tobacco use, raised a concern about reduced funding for anti-tobacco messages.

Ethan Nadelmann, exec-

utive director of the Drug Policy Alliance, said, "The best news in this year's report is the significant decline in cigarette smoking, not just because that ultimately is the most deadly drug but also because it confirms that drug abuse is best reduced through sensible public health measures rather than criminal penalties, prosecutions and prisons."

Findings of the survey of 49,347 students in 402 public and private schools found:

■ Among seniors, 75.1 percent have taken alcohol at some time. For 10th- and eighth-graders, the figures are 63.2 percent and 41 percent.

■ More than half, 57.5 percent, of seniors said they had been drunk at some time, compared with 42.1 percent of 10th-graders and 19.5 percent of eighth-graders, down 0.5 point.