

Steroid Abuse

It is estimated that at least one million people in the United States now take some form of steroids and that the black market does \$100 million worth of business annually. Seven percent of high school males have used or are using steroids. This means that between a quarter million and a half million adolescent males in the U.S. have used anabolic steroids.

Anabolic steroids are synthetic male sex hormones which are legally available only by prescription. In the practice of medicine, anabolic steroids are used in certain rare and serious diseases. Yet, athletes take dosages, far larger than what doctors normally describe for patients, in order to increase their competitiveness, strength, explosiveness and body mass.

Steroids can be taken orally or by injection and are commonly used, most often along with other drugs, in cycles that last from 4 to 12 weeks. Are they addicting? Whether steroids should be controlled substances is a matter of debate. There is no animal research on the subject. Lab animals do not like steroids, so it is difficult to prove abuse potential, one of the criteria for scheduling a drug as a controlled substance and thus placing it under the control of the Federal Drug Enforcement Administration, along with other legal and illegal addictive drugs. However, recent studies give compelling evidence that steroids are indeed addictive: "Even when these and other serious effects of taking steroids are no longer positive and users' lives begin to deteriorate, victims continue seeking and using steroids". This is a sign of true addiction. Despite warnings and tragic stories, use among teenage athletes continues to grow. Young people believe they are immortal and are often desperate to make the team, desperate for the glory that comes with winning.

Cardiovascular Problems

Among the most dangerous consequences of taking large amounts of steroids are changes in the cardiovascular system. These changes are probably reversible but may result in arteriosclerotic disease and heart failure. There have been reports of serious heart attacks and strokes associated with steroid use.

Sexual Changes

Changes in sex characteristics and in reproductive functioning are common among athletes who take steroids. Males may suffer from shriveling of the testicles, low sperm count or enlargement of the prostate gland. Males may also develop enlarged breasts which must be surgically removed. Females may experience increased hair growth on the face, enlargement of the clitoris and deepening of the voice. Acne is another common side effect reported in users of both sexes.



Psychological Changes

There are also psychological changes that occur from steroid use. Users feel good and have increased energy; they are more competitive and have greater capacity to endure pain. Users report that steroids produce euphoria, increase self-esteem, boost sexual drive and decrease the need for sleep when intoxicated, all of which are effects also associated with other abused substances such as cocaine. Steroid users are more irritable, however, and more prone to increased aggressiveness and paranoia. Severe depression and apathy result between uses and also from discontinued use.

Stunted Growth

Anabolic steroids may prematurely close the growth centers of the long bones, which mean that adolescents who take anabolic steroids may be in danger of stunting their growth. This is particularly frightening since 38% of male users start using steroids at age 15 or less.

Treatment

Since many of the tragic consequences of abusing steroids are irreparable, it is important to seek immediate treatment if steroids abuse is suspected.