



A Division of the Vermont  
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# Nuggets

News, notes, and findings  
from ADAP Research and  
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## Adolescent Smoking: An Indicator for Other Risky Behaviors

Adolescents often develop behaviors that continue into adulthood. Cigarette smoking almost always begins in adolescence and is the number one cause of preventable morbidity and mortality. Clearly, cigarette smoking is dangerous in its own right. However, recent national research suggests that smoking among adolescents is also associated with other high risk health behaviors, such as drinking alcohol, using illicit drugs, physically fighting, sexual intercourse, and failure to wear safety belts. Is smoking an indicator of other risky behaviors among Vermont adolescents?

According to the 1995 Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), more than a third (38%) of all Vermont 8th-12th graders smoke cigarettes. Using data from the YRBS, we examined the association between smoking cigarettes and other risk behaviors such as alcohol use, other drug use, drinking and driving, fighting, sexual behavior, suicide, and safety belt use. **Adolescent smokers were 2 - 13 times more likely than non-smokers to engage in these other risk behaviors.**

These data have many implications for prevention and intervention. First, although the data do not establish a causal link between smoking and other risk behaviors, nicotine via cigarettes is generally considered a “gateway drug” that leads to experimentation and use of illicit drugs. According to this theory, efforts to reduce the prevalence of smoking (e.g., restricting youth access, no smoking school policies) will also reduce the prevalence of other drug use. Second, cigarette smoking is one of the more easily observable risk behaviors, providing parents and others (e.g., peers, teachers, physicians, student assistance counselors, etc.) opportunities for intervention by starting conversations with adolescent smokers about health and safety. Finally, like the canary in the mine shaft, smoking may be the best single indicator of the generalized effects of comprehensive prevention and health promotion programs.

Risk Behavior	Non-Smoker	Smoker
<b>Alcohol Use</b> (during past 30 days)	35%	82%
<b>Binge Drinking</b> (during past 30 days)	16%	59%
<b>Riding with a Drinking Driver</b> (during past 30 days)	25%	55%
<b>Marijuana Use</b> (during past 30 days)	10%	58%
<b>Cocaine Use</b> (during past 30 days)	0.6%	8%
<b>Inhalant Use</b> (lifetime use)	15%	45%
<b>Other Drug Use</b> (lifetime use)	6%	38%
<b>Physical Fighting</b> (during past 12 months)	28%	50%
<b>Safety Belt Use</b> (never, rarely, or sometimes wear)	21%	39%
<b>Ever Had Sexual Intercourse</b>	29%	68%
<b>Made a Suicide Plan</b> (during past 12 months)	15%	34%

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