History and Use of Steroids

Office of National Drug Control Policy

This selection provides an overview of anabolic steroids, their history, use, production, and their considerable health risks. Not only are steroids widely available in sports, but the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) finds that their use is widespread among teenagers and young adults. Steroids, which can be injected, applied to the skin, or taken orally, have found their way into school gyms and college locker rooms.

The ONDCP is a component of the Executive Office of the President, and was established by the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988. The principal purpose of ONDCP is to establish policies, priorities, and objectives for the nation’s drug control program. The goals of the program are to reduce illicit drug use, manufacturing, and trafficking, drug-related crime and violence, and drug-related health consequences.

Overview

Anabolic steroids were developed in the late 1930s primarily to treat hypogonadism, a condition in which the testes do not produce sufficient testosterone for normal growth, development, and sexual functioning. The primary medical uses of these compounds are to treat delayed puberty, some types of impotence, and wasting of the body caused by HIV infection or other diseases.

During the 1930s, scientists discovered that anabolic steroids could facilitate the growth of skeletal muscle in laboratory animals. This led to abuse of these compounds by bodybuilders and weightlifters and then by athletes in other sports.

Anabolic steroids can be taken orally, injected intramuscularly, or rubbed on the skin when in the form of gels or

creams. These drugs are often used in patterns called cycling, which involves taking multiple doses of steroids over a specific period of time, stopping for a period, and starting again. Users also frequently combine several different types of steroids in a process known as stacking. By doing this, users believe that the different steroids will interact to produce an effect on muscle size that is greater than the effects of using each drug individually.

Another mode of steroid use is “pyramiding.” This is a process in which users slowly escalate steroid use (increasing the number of drugs used at one time and/or the dose and frequency of one or more steroids) reaching a peak amount at mid-cycle and gradually tapering the dose toward the end of the cycle.

**Extent of Use**

Results from the 2006 Monitoring the Future Study, which surveys students in eighth, tenth, and twelfth grades, show that 1.6% of eighth graders, 1.8% of tenth graders, and 2.7% of twelfth graders reported using steroids at least once in their lifetimes.

Regarding the ease by which one can obtain steroids, 17.1% of eighth graders, 30.2% of tenth graders, and 41.1% of twelfth graders surveyed in 2006 reported that steroids were “fairly easy” or “very easy” to obtain. Furthermore, 60.2% of twelfth graders surveyed reported that using steroids was a “great risk” during 2006.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) also conducts a survey of high school students throughout the United States, the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS). Nearly 5% of all high school students surveyed by CDC in 2005 reported lifetime use of steroid pills/shots without a doctor’s prescription.

Approximately 1.9% of young adults (ages 19–28) surveyed in 2005 reported lifetime use of steroids.