

# Teens who crave excitement more likely to smoke, use multiple illicit substances

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A new study of high school seniors in the U.S. suggests that teens who are less satisfied with their lives and seek out risky experiences and exciting, unpredictable friends are more likely to use multiple illicit

substances regularly.

Teens' attitude toward e-cigarette use also played a critical role in their use of other [substances](#). Students who considered vaping to be a relatively harmless activity were more likely to use significant amounts of tobacco, alcohol, marijuana and other drugs.

These teens, called "polysubstance users" in the study, scored the highest on sensation seeking, according to researchers Kevin Tan and Douglas C. Smith.

Tan and Smith are professors of social work at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, where Smith is also the director of the Center for Prevention Research and Development.

"Students who scored the highest on sensation-seeking viewed substance use as less harmful than did peers who were low-level users that mostly abstained from drinking, smoking and using drugs," said Tan, the first author of the study.

"While the high [school](#) years are typically a time during which risk-taking and sensation-seeking peak, our results indicate that there are marked differences in sensation-seeking among students who regularly use substances compared with those who don't."

"Our results reveal that perceptions of [e-cigarette use](#) are associated with all patterns of polysubstance use," Smith said. "Health education messages discouraging vaping should continue to be disseminated, given the increasing appeal and broad accessibility of these products among [high school students](#)."

Polysubstance users composed about 4% of the study sample.

A second group of teens, about 24% of the sample, were primarily marijuana users, but also dabbled with cigarettes or e-cigarettes, alcohol and other drugs.

The remaining 72% of teens in the sample were low-level users who for the most part abstained. These students associated the greatest risks with substance use, particularly heavy drinking and vaping.

"We need more research on the true health effects of vaping, because the prevalence of it is way ahead of our knowledge about the consequences," Smith said. "Although e-cigarettes were initially marketed as devices to help smokers quit, that argument probably only applies to a small percentage of young people. In fact, there are risks to vaping, and for teens, [e-cigarettes](#) may be an initiation into nicotine addiction or into [vaping](#) marijuana."

Tan said parental involvement in the students' schooling, such as helping with or checking on whether teens did their homework, differentiated the low-level users from their peers who were habitual marijuana users.

Teens' [academic performance](#) and their disciplinary referrals were important predictors of substance use patterns as well, the researchers found.

"Although 12th graders are on the threshold of adulthood, parental involvement and students' engagement in school are still critical at this time," Tan said. "These findings emphasize the importance of parents taking active roles in their children's lives, their schooling and what they do outside the home."

To mitigate the risks of poor developmental outcomes associated with teens' poly-substance use, the researchers suggested that schools be encouraged to develop a continuum of multitiered preventative and

intervention approaches that address students' academic and behavioral needs and promote high school completion.

**More information:** Kevin Tan et al. Individual, Family, and School Correlates across Patterns of High School Poly-substance Use, *Substance Use & Misuse* (2019). [DOI: 10.1080/10826084.2019.1701035](https://doi.org/10.1080/10826084.2019.1701035)

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