

Stonebriar Psychiatric Services News & Views

Anabolic Steroids

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Ages Served

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"Come On Barry, Roger, Juan...

Tell Me It Ain't So!"

For many over the past year or two, the sports pages, as well as the front page have often been occupied with stories of baseball heroes who have been accused of using "steroids." This has not only occupied the attention of club owners, managers, and attorneys, but it has also occupied a great deal of time on the part of senators and congressmen. I wouldn't begin to try and understand the whys and wherefores regarding the political input in this issue, but I do think that it is important for the public to be informed of the potential dangers and prevalence of anabolic steroids that are being used by friends, family, or our children.

The anabolic steroids consist of a family of drugs that include the natural male hormone, testosterone, as well as many synthetic forms that have come into being since approximately the 1940s. All of these have some degree of anabolic, or muscle building, properties as well as androgenic, which relate to their masculinizing effects. Many of these anabolic steroids, such as Dianabol, Anavar, and Winstrol-V, are available in oral, intramuscular, as well as transdermal forms. They are generally subject to some of the same prescribing requirements as are the narcotics, and they can be used legally for certain medical purposes but all are illegal when used primarily to enhance physical performance or increase muscle bulk.

In studies done several years ago, it was estimated that approximately one million persons in the United States had used illegal steroids at least once. This tends to frequently be those of middle-class and predominantly Caucasian, with males being approximately 6 times more likely to use than are females. Of particular concern is that almost half of the users began using before age 16, and the majority of users were between ages 18-25 with the next highest use being in the 26-34 age range. Some studies have estimated that the use of anabolic steroids in those competing in bodybuilding is up to 50-80%. Now many may question why make this such a big deal, as it is a "matter of personal choice." Some might also argue the same for the use of any other illegal substance or drug, but a part of the problem is that many users, particularly those of younger age, may not be fully aware of the potential implications of their use.

After oral administration of testosterone, only very small amounts are absorbed. Some of the synthetic forms are less extensively metabolized after oral administration and therefore may result in higher blood levels. But for the most part, most of these anabolic steroids are administered by injection in order to achieve the highest concentrations and "the most bang for your buck."

Individuals using these drugs tend to be involved in activities that require endurance and strength, and generally with regard to athletic competition of one form or another. The use of these drugs is often reinforced by an increase in performance due to increased strength, endurance, or muscle mass, but there is also the fact that they are addictive with untoward effects noted when people try to stop taking them. Studies have indicated a psychological vulnerability toward taking these steroids in those who have low self-esteem, body image disturbance, or extreme competitiveness and need to succeed in their athletic endeavor.



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Clinical Features

When steroids are initially begun, they may induce a sense of increased energy or even hyperactivity, often coupled with a sense of euphoria. Frequently after even short periods of use they may become associated with increased irritability, hostility, anger arousal, anxiety, and also depression. The depression frequently becomes the most noticeable and prominent when they are discontinued. Studies have indicated that up to 15% of individuals using anabolic steroids may experience hypomanic or manic (see previous newsletters in archives) with perhaps a smaller percentage experiencing actual psychotic symptoms. There have also been clear associations between steroid abuse and violent behavior, known on the streets as "roid rage." It should specifically be noted that anabolic steroids are not just a harmless "nutritional supplement" that individuals might take so that they can get a better workout on their way home from work. They represent addictive substances and are generally used by individuals who are extremely concerned about their body's physical appearance and state. What is most ironic is the damage that they may be doing with the individual not even aware of it at the time.

The so-called positive of using anabolic steroids is that they certainly can cause rapid development of muscle mass and bulk, along with muscle definition and increased strength. However, side effects can include acne, breast enlargement, premature balding, jaundice, and decreased size and atrophy of the testicles and prostate. Young boys using steroids may also experience painful enlargement of the genitalia. In young adolescents it can cause stunted growth by causing premature closing of the growth plates in the bones. Women who use anabolic steroids may experience a lowering of their voice, shrinking of their breasts, clitoral enlargement (which can be permanent), hair thinning, and irregularity of their menstrual cycles. The use of anabolic steroids can result in abnormal liver function tests, a decrease in the HDL (the good ones) lipoproteins and an increase in the LDL (the bad ones) lipoproteins. Decreased sperm production has been reported, along with an increased association with heart attacks and cerebrovascular disease.

It should also be noted that weaker and more "benign forms" of anabolic steroids may have potential side effects as well. Certain drugs, such as dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA) and androstenedione, are considered adrenal androgens and are actually marketed as food supplements and sold over-the-counter along with vitamins. To my knowledge they have still not been approved or regulated by the FDA. They are the steroid precursors for the body in the making of androgens and estrogens, and many who take these often report an increase in one's sense of physical and even at times emotional well-being. But when taken in high doses, the side effects can be quite similar to those mentioned above, and may include voice change, increased hair growth for women (in places that you do not want hair growth, such as above your lip), and possibly make men more prone to prostatic hypertrophy or cancer.

Conclusion

We have all heard stories, some locally, of teenagers who have used anabolic steroids and become depressed and suicidal, or at other times become enraged and potentially homicidal. In light of the potentially severe side effects and physical consequences, one should be sure that your children are well versed and educated about the potential dangers of anabolic steroids, the potential legal consequences, and that no athletic competition is worth the risk. Work hard, eat right, and compete to the best of one's ability, but at the same time we must also accept that there are limits naturally imposed upon what our bodies can, and should, be asked to do.



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