

Review Article

Substance Abuse Among Youth and Adolescents: Epidemiology, Psychosocial Determinants, Prevention Strategies, and Public Health Implications in India

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A B S T R A C T

Background: The problem of substance abuse is gaining growing importance as a public health challenge both internationally and in India, due to the serious physical, mental, emotional, social and academic consequences associated with this behaviour among young people. Adolescence is a particular vulnerable period of development, marked by increased exploration, identity maturation and changes that belies other associated physical systems yet deteriorating emotional stability needing social peer support and driven impulsive behavioural response such as substance use.⁹ The substances that commonly abuse can be divided the age group of adolescents such as alcohol, tobacco, nicotine products like vape pens (e-cigarettes), cannabis, opioids (prescription painkillers and heroin), inhalants (substances that are temporarily sniffed or inhaled to achieve a short-term high) All drugs or steroids which includes amphetamines, cocaine-like stimulants known by common brand names including Vicodin. The increasing substance use among adolescents can be attributed to multiple factors like rapid urbanization, attitudinal change in the society, peer pressure, dysfunctional family life, higher rate of academic stress and digital media exposure along with ineffective coping strategies.¹⁻⁴

Results: The available epidemiological evidence shows that alcohol and tobacco are still the most used psychoactive substances among adolescents, followed by cannabis, inhalants, opioids and other emerging substances. The results of this review indicate a strong association between adolescent substance abuse and various sociopsychological risk factors such as peer influence, dysfunctional family environment, emotional problems, adverse childhood experiences, inadequate parental control, low self-esteem, mental illnesses in adolescence and social media. Neurobiological findings show that robust immature executive functioning and heightened dopaminergic reward sensitivity during adolescence increases the likelihood of experimentation and addiction. On the path less covered substance use in adolescents is a contribution factor to dropping out of school, poor academic

performance, school absenteeism, violence risk behaviours including risky sexual behaviour and driving under influence of substances. Quickly Background Public health evidence strongly reinforces concerns on the easy availability of psychoactive substances and insufficient knowledge in youth populations, especially for low- and middle-income settings like India.

Discussion: A holistic, multidisciplinary and youth-specific approach encompassing prevention, early identification, mental health promotion, psychosocial counselling, rehabilitation and community engagement is warranted to address adolescent substance use. Certainly, school-based education, parental involvement, access to adolescent-friendly health services, behavioural counselling and life-skill training, community peer support services and public health awareness programs are key components for reducing vulnerability and preventing a well-established pattern of substance use and long-term addiction.³³ Enhancing regulatory policies, improving access to mental healthcare, reducing stigma and implementing culturally relevant interventions are quintessential to avert the increasing menace of substance abuse among adolescents. The findings provide the first evidence, drawn from multiple sites across eight countries on three continents, for a significant and dose-response association between suicidal ideation in adolescence and medium- to long-term health and social outcomes, supporting early prevention and coordinated public health action as core mechanisms to promote positive adolescent development.

Keywords: Adolescents, Youth Health, Substance Abuse, Addiction, Alcohol, Tobacco, Psychoactive Substances, Mental Health, India, Public Health

Introduction

Because of its impact on physical health, psychological development, academic achievement, social adjustment, and lifelong quality of life, youth and adolescent substance abuse is a rapidly evolving public health issue in many countries around the world. Transition from childhood to adulthood, adolescence is a developmental period of dynamic change in the biological, cognitive, emotional and social spheres, which helps determine future health behaviour and psychosocial adaptation. Adolescence is defined as the period from ages 10 to 19 years by the World Health Organization (WHO), while youth generally refers to individuals between the ages of 15 and 24. Young people go through rapid growth, hormonal changes, emotional instability, social identity formation, autonomy-seeking behaviours and curiosity-driven novelty-seeking during this transition period,¹⁻³ which renders them uniquely vulnerable to numerous forms of risk behaviour including psychoactive substance use.⁴

Drug dependence substance uses disorder (SUD) The term substance abuse is generally used to refer to the excessive, damaging, abusive or maladaptive consumption of psychoactive substances that adversely affects the psychological process and its core domains of functioning: physical, emotional, cognitive, behavioural and social. Substances abused by adolescents include alcohol, tobacco, nicotine products, cannabis, opioids, stimulants, inhalants sedatives and misuse of prescription medications (the latter steadily increasing), as well as novel synthetic psychoactive substances that are being increasingly reported.³ Although experimentation and novelty-seeking behaviour can be perceived as somewhat normative among adolescents, persistent addictive substances exposure may cause neurobiological changes with consequences of tolerance, dependence, compulsive use, addiction development and above all persistent impairment in social functioning.⁴

Adolescent use of substances has raised deep worries amongst health care providers, educators, mental health professionals and politicians due to high rates substance use initiation during adolescence being associated with addiction in adulthood and subsequent adverse adult outcomes. Findings from global epidemiological studies have shown that alcohol and tobacco use persists as the most commonly abused psychoactive substances among youth populations, followed by cannabis, inhalants, opioids (including heroin), and synthetic drugs.⁵ A number of factors such as rapid transition in cultural norms, urbanization, globalisation and digital media exposure have rendered these adolescents more vulnerable to substance use.⁶

Adolescent substance abuse in the Indian context is even more challenging because of its sociocultural diversity, regional, family systems and pressures for academic performance, urban-rural dichotomy and inequitable access to health care. National surveys and school-based studies conducted over the last two decades in India have charted increase trends of tobacco smoking, use of smokeless tobacco by adolescents, alcohol abuse among school-goers,⁷⁻⁸ and college students. Despite legislative restrictions and preventive policies, smokeless tobacco products, flavoured nicotine preparations, electronic cigarettes, alcohol beverages, or inhalants remain freely available to adolescents in several areas. This accessibility coupled with low awareness, poor parental supervision, peer pressure, stress and socio-acceptance of drug use plays a major role behind early experimentation and further habitual use.⁹

A portion of the developmental vulnerability in adolescence can be attributable to neurobiological processes related to continued maturation of the brain. Neuroscience evidence shows that areas associated with affect or emotional processing, reward sensitivity, impulsivity and sensation-

seeking mature earlier than those related to executive functioning, behavioural regulation, judgment and planning, and future risk assessment.¹⁰ As a result, adolescents are more sensitive to emotionally rewarding situations and peer influence and novelty-seeking behaviours while showing less inhibition-related control. Psychoactive drugs stimulate dopaminergic circuits in the mesolimbic reward system causing reinforcing sensations with eventual risk of habitual use and addiction.¹¹ During adolescence, overwhelming exposure may result in even greater changes to neuroplasticity and emotional regulation, cognitive performance and psychological reinforcement which ultimately leading to a higher vulnerability for developing chronic dependency and mental health disorders.

The psychosocial environment is actually a decisive factor in determining substance-related behaviours at adolescence. A number of factors have nevertheless been consistently identified as major predictors of adolescent substance use,¹² including family dysfunction, household conflicts, parental neglect and inadequate communication, lack of supervision or monitoring, childhood trauma or adverse life events and high emotional deprivation besides low socio-economic status. Peer pressure has a heavyweight especially during the adolescent stage of life as it builds around social acceptance, heteronomous morality and identity formation driving behavioural decisions. Adolescents may begin smoking, alcohol use or experimenting with recreational drugs to: (i) meet perceived peer pressure; (ii) relieve emotional distress; (iii) serve as motivation for socialization and social advantage or elevate self-esteem in circumstances of peer unpopularity; or (iv) counteract academic pressures.¹³ and they frequently co-occur with other disorders, such as bullying, loneliness, social exclusion anxiety, depression and low self-esteem which may aggravate the risk of becoming dependent on substances.¹⁴

The rise of digital media and social networking online has changed the patterns of substance exposure within race/ethnicity specific subcategories. Alcohol use, vaping, smoking, and recreational drug use are often expected especially on social media with content showcasing it as desirable would be glamorization of the behaviour.¹⁵ in social media, entertainment industries celebrity culture targeted advertisements online gaming communities digital influencers and portrayals of people experiencing tension or stress amongst them This kind of repeated exposure can normalize risk taking behaviours, adjust perceptions about attitudes and beliefs towards substance use and decrease perceived health risks among youthful audiences. Pointing to the expanding digital ecosystem, it relates opportunities and challenges for prevention, awareness, and behavioural interventions.

All of these negative repercussions of substance use in adolescents are multidimensional and can extend beyond the acute intoxication or behavioural disturbances associated with use. It can have physical ramifications such as respiratory disease, hepatic failure, cognitive dysfunction, heart problems, malnutrition in younger years and high susceptibility to chronic diseases later in life.¹⁶ Similarly alarming are the psychological and psychiatric impacts, which are associated with anxiety disorder, depression, self-harm behaviour, suicidal ideation, psychosis (perceptual anomalies), emotional dysregulation (among others).¹⁷ Impaired concentration, absenteeism, lower academic performance and school dropout as well as reduced occupational productivity are also adverse educational outcomes of substance abuse. As a result, the effect of addiction on adolescents and society as a whole is also exacerbated by social consequences like violence, criminal activity, risky sexual behaviour and interpersonal violence.¹⁸

Adolescent substance abuse is a critical public health concern in India due to its impact on educational attainment, labour market productivity, safety net health service provision, social cohesion and mental well-being. National adolescent health promotion initiatives have made promising progress whilst tobacco control, mental healthcare and youth counselling remain inadequate due to stigma, absence of infrastructure or unequal availability.¹⁹ More school-centered interventions, teenager friendly health-care providers, parent-based therapy, mental wellness promotion, peer education and early detection of problematic behaviour are to be given more attention for avoiding substance initiation and improving resilience among at-risk youth populations.²⁰

Given the rise in adolescent substance use, its multifactorial aetiology, and the lasting impact of early initiation of alcohol and drug use on multiple health domains across the life course, evidence synthesis remains an important approach to informing prevention, diagnosis, treatment, rehabilitation and public health policy. Thus, this comprehensive review aims to present focused information on the epidemiology, psychosocial determinants, neurobiological mechanisms, clinical repercussions and public health implications of substance abuse among youth/adolescents with special reference to India.

Result

Table 1 presents the commonly abused substances among adolescents and their major clinical implications.

The emergence of early substance exposure necessitates a deeper understanding of determinants influencing adolescent vulnerability. Genetic predisposition, social environment, parenting style, mental health disorders,

poverty, adverse childhood experiences, bullying, and emotional neglect significantly contribute to initiation and continuation of substance use.⁹

Dopaminergic reward pathways in the brain are closely tied to neurobiological mechanisms underlying substance abuse. The heightened impulsivity and immature executive control mechanisms of adolescence predispose one to sensation-seeking behaviour. The pleasure and reinforcement produced by the release of dopamine following exposure to psychoactive substances activate neural networks underlying drug-seeking behaviour until they become compulsive and lead to addiction.¹⁰ Chronic exposure also changes neural plasticity and emotional regulation, leading to mood disorders and reduced decision-making ability.¹¹

Epidemiology of Substance Abuse Among Youth and Adolescents

Exposure to adolescent substance abuse shows enormous regional dependence which can be understood by considering socioeconomic status, cultural exposure, legislation, education and access to healthcare. International research has shown that among adolescents, alcohol and tobacco are still the most widely used substances followed by cannabis and inhalants.¹² School based surveys conducted in India have shown rising prevalence

of smoking, alcohol experimenters and smokeless tobacco use along with substance misuse among urban and semi-urban adolescents.¹³

Smokeless tobacco products, smoking devices such as vapes and inhalant abuse has emerged as an additional concern among school-going children in India due to affordability, peer acceptability and poor supervision (Figure 2).¹⁴ Psychosocial vulnerabilities that facilitate initiation into substance use have been repeatedly stressed, as in the National Mental Health Survey and adolescent health programs.¹⁵

The consequences of substance abuse are multidimensional and extend beyond health outcomes into education, social functioning, criminality, interpersonal relationships, and long-term employability. Adolescents engaging in substance abuse are more likely to experience poor school attendance, violence, risky sexual behaviour, anxiety disorders, depression, and future unemployment.^{16,17}

The Indian healthcare system increasingly recognizes the necessity of school-based health education, adolescent counselling clinics, youth-friendly healthcare services, and preventive mental health programs to combat growing substance abuse trends among adolescents.¹⁸

Table I. Commonly Abused Substances Among Adolescents and Associated Health Consequences

Substance Type	Common Examples	Major Consequences
Tobacco/Nicotine	Cigarettes, bidi, e-cigarettes	Respiratory disease, addiction, cardiovascular risk
Alcohol	Beer, spirits	Liver dysfunction, accidents, behavioural impairment
Cannabis	Marijuana, Hashish	Cognitive dysfunction, anxiety, dependence
Opioids	Heroin, prescription opioids	Respiratory depression, overdose
Inhalants	Glue, paint thinner	Neurotoxicity, cognitive impairment
Stimulants	Cocaine, amphetamines	Hypertension, psychosis

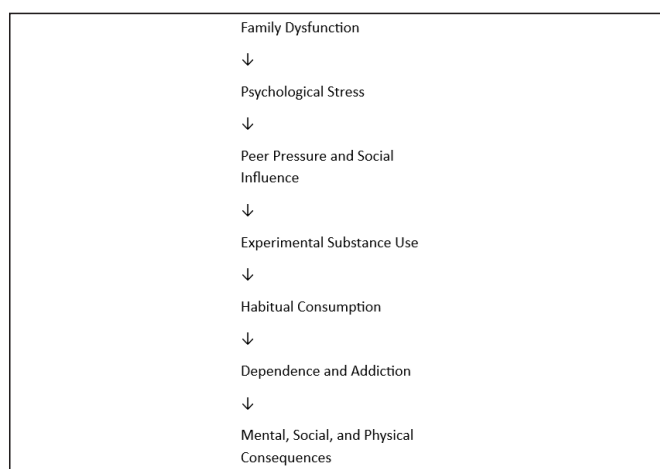
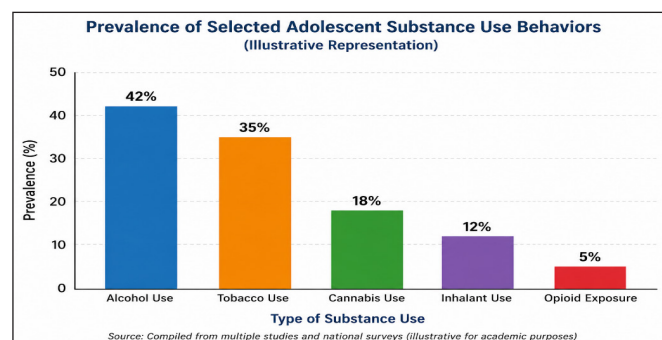


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of adolescent substance abuse

Table 2. Major Determinants Associated With Adolescent Substance Abuse

Risk Factor	Mechanism of Influence
Peer Pressure	Social acceptance and conformity
Academic Stress	Emotional coping and escapism
Family Dysfunction	Emotional neglect and conflict
Mental Health Disorders	Self-medication tendency
Social Media Exposure	Behavioural modelling
Poverty/Urbanization	Increased vulnerability

**Figure 2. Approximate Prevalence of Selected Adolescent Substance use**

Discussion

The prevalence of substance uses and abuse among the youth of today, as well as adolescents has become one of most important public health challenge in the 21st century because it impacts so many more milestones such as mental health problems, educational attainment, social development and long-term population health. During adolescence there are important biological, emotional, cognitive and social changes that all can impact behaviour and contribute to risk taking propensity. The review of the evidence in this article suggests that adolescence is not only a developmental window characterized by increased curiosity and behavioural exploration but rather, a neurodevelopmental transition stage where many vulnerabilities to psychosocial stressors and environmental exposures to psychoactive substances are compounded by immaturity both within the brain's neural circuitry and hormone machinery controlling behaviour.² Thus, adolescent substance abuse should not be interpreted as a single behavioural problem but rather a multifaceted phenomenon that can only be understood through analysis within the medical, psychological, social and political level context of understanding.

Discussion One of the key observations that emerge from this review is the predominance of psychosocial determinants for adolescent substance use behaviour. Peer pressure is the most prominent and consistent predictor of initiation and continuation of drug use among youth; over 75% of adolescents report having used alcohol

under peer pressure. In adolescence, social acceptance and belongingness commonly emerge as the dominant psychological need, reversing brain functionality such as elevated sensitivity towards peer behaviours that are perceived to be socially rewarding or culturally acceptable.³ During adolescence, indoctrination to tobacco smoking, alcohol consumption, vaping or drug experimentation is reported in peer groups (especially), schools, peers at social functions and online 26–29. Under many circumstances, substance use is seen as a marker of autonomy, maturity, social status or emotional development and thus promotes experimentation in those who recognized exposure risks to health. Social conformity theory also states that repeated exposure to one or more peers using substances may affect risk perception and that over time negative behaviours become normal.⁴

Another major factor in the risk to substance abuse among adolescents is family environment. Familial factors—stable family functioning with emotional security, supervision, communication and parental involvement are protective against experimentation and drug addiction while dysfunctional family structures increase vulnerability dramatically.⁵ Family conflict, parental oppression, erratic punishment, emotional unavailability and domestic violence as well as substance use within the family can lead to psychological stressors that approve coping mechanisms among adolescents. Those adolescents raised without environments promoting emotional support may be driven to seek acceptance and stress relief from peer networks

and psychoactive substances.⁶ In addition, intergenerational transmission of substance use behaviours has been reported in the previous literature indicating that parental smoking, alcohol use or drug dependence can normalize such behaviour and promote acceptance in younger family members.⁷

Academic stress and performance-related anxiety among these adolescents have been the most appropriate risk factors for early substance abuse, particularly among competitive academic settings/hyper-competitive education systems like India. Many adolescents' facing examination pressure, fear of failure, career indecision, social comparison and parental expectations can experience emotional exhaustion and deteriorating mental health.⁸ In a number of others, the non-medical use of substances is required to lower tension caused by anxiousness, emotional turmoil, insomnia restlessness concentration deficits or depressive signs. Thus, academic burnout and chronic psychological stress might indirectly heighten the risk of tobacco smoking, alcohol use, stimulant abuse, and sedative misuse among students.⁹ This correlation emphasises the necessity of incorporating stress management interventions, counselling programs and mental health education in schools and universities.

Another important factor needing due consideration is the increasing importance of digital media and online social networks. Adolescents are consistently exposed to visual portrayals of alcohol consumption, tobacco use, vaping and recreational drug use via movies, advertisements, influencers, gaming communities and other digital contents.¹⁰ Ongoing exposure to glamorized depictions of SA may prompt risk misperceptions, and imitation — especially in psychologically vulnerable youth samples. Repeated exposure to substance-related digital content is linked with greater curiosity, engagement and positive attitudes towards psychoactive substances.¹¹ This is why digital spaces have become a new frontier for prevention efforts, media literacy training, and regulation.

Neurological vulnerability during adolescence: Are adolescents really more vulnerable to drug addiction due to neurobiological changes. Neurodevelopmental research shows that adolescence is marked by the asynchronous development of brain systems, with affective reward circuits maturing far before prefrontal executive control regions for judgment, planning, impulse modulation and behavioural inhibition.¹² The mesolimbic dopamine system (involving the nucleus accumbens and the ventral tegmental area) that is particularly sensitive to pleasure during adolescence. Psychoactive drugs stimulate dopamine release artificially reinforcing this pleasurable experience and the behaviour.¹³ The chronic repetitive state of exposure leads to neuroplastic changes that involve alterations within

emotional processing, memory consolidation and stress responses over the long-term which then progressively leads toward compulsive use and a state of dependency. As a result, these neurobiological changes can help explain why adolescents start using substances so early; they're more likely than adults to develop chronic addiction over time.¹⁴

The psychological effects of substance abuse in adolescence are just as disturbing, and often co-exist in young individuals who already have an underlying psychiatric illness. Adolescents with substance use disorders commonly have comorbid depression, anxiety, conduct disorder, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, self-harm behaviour, suicidal ideation and emotional dysregulation.¹⁵ Most psychotropic substances provide a temporary ease or relief from the experience of emotional pain, isolation, trauma, social anxiety and lack of self-esteem. However, chronic exposure to these substances often does not ease decline in symptomatology; rather, by perpetuating psychological instability, prolonged use increases vulnerability to the onset of significant psychiatric morbidity.¹⁶ The reciprocal relationship existing between mental health disorders and substance abuse illustrates the need for intervention that can facilitate screening and management of co-morbid addiction as well as psychiatric conditions simultaneously.

The school-related effects of using drugs during adolescence are another major public health issue. Adolescents who regularly smoke tobacco, misuse alcohol or use recreational drugs are often inattentive with poorer cognitive function and academic achievement resulting in absenteeism, behavioural problems and dropping out from education.¹⁷ Increased impulsivity and diminished ability to make decisions can impair educational and social functioning by increasing discipline problems at school, conflict with peers and teachers, and lower academic aspirations. For this reason, educational institutions are important contexts for early detection, preventive interventions, behavioural counselling and psychosocial support services.

Adolescent substance abuse also plays a role in coping mechanisms that both place youth at high risk of engaging in high-risk behavioural practices as well as increasing their vulnerability to social isolation. Confirmed and unconfounded associations: Alcohol, psychoactive substances alter judgment and mental capacity therefore making youth more vulnerable to unsafe sexual behaviour, violence (bullying), crime, accidental injuries and risky behaviours such as suicidal attempts, etc. Using substances in combination with alcohol also leads to the increased risk of unprotected sexual intercourse, sexually transmitted infections, unintended pregnancies and psychosocial distress.¹⁹ Moreover, violence, delinquency and robbery or gang involvement may hinder psychosocial development as well as social reintegration.

The socioeconomic impact that substance abuse in adolescence has goes further than healthcare systems since productivity, employment opportunities and educational outcomes will be affected which determines national development indicators. Accesses lifetime healthcare costs through several channels such as treatment and care, rehabilitation services, emergency department visits, mental health interventions and diseases related to tobacco and alcohol use.²⁰ Second, non-monetized social costs, such as lower education, loss of employment and increase in poverty and the consequent flow-through effects on criminal justice system association and family dysfunction have a compounding effect on this burden. Thus, adolescent substance intake ought to be viewed as not just a health problem but also as a socio-economic growth constraint which should be addressed through multilateral interventions.

The Indian public health context provides a foundation for addressing adolescent substance use through distinct opportunities and challenges. Adolescent-friendly health services and the Rashtriya Kishor Sathya Karyakram- two programs with a distinctive focus on adolescent mental health promotion, reproductive health awareness, and counselling for behavioural change in Indians aged 10–19—also help support this improvement.²¹ Yet, on the other hand substance abuse prevention has not been implemented uniformly in many areas due to low awareness, stigma associated with addiction, lack of qualified mental health professionals and availability of youth-specific rehabilitation services. Limited access to early diagnosis and treatment services continues to be exhibited by rural populations, tribal communities, economically disadvantaged adolescents, and marginalized youth.²²

Non-pharmaceutical interventions are still key for enhancing preventive strategies at the community level. The literature also indicates school-based awareness campaigns, peer mentoring programs, family counselling, life-skill education and emotional resilience training, sports participation youth digital literacy interventions and youth-friendly counselling services which improve coping mechanism have had positive effects on start of substance use.²³ Family engagement programme strengthening parent-adolescent communication and emotional bonding can further mitigate psychosocial vulnerabilities. At the same time, effective implementation of legislation limiting marketing of tobacco products, alcohol availability, ecommerce for addictive substances and sales to youth is needed to lower overall environmental exposure and normalization.²⁴

Health promotion, rather than punishment, should take precedence in preventive strategies. Youth with substance use disorders experience stigma, labelling, social exclusion and punishment for their behaviour which reduces help-

seeking.²⁵ As demonstrated in Figure 3, nonpunitive strategies such as counselling without bias/nonjudgmental counselling; confidentiality for adolescents (the ability to receive care discreetly); motivational interviewing; school mental health programs; and behavioural interventions should be preferred over punitive approaches. The greatest likelihood of achieving long-term recovery and psychosocial integration is offered by a multidisciplinary approach to care, with specialist roles from paediatricians, psychiatrists, psychologists, counsellors or social workers and educators in collaboration with families.



Figure 3. Public Health Framework for Prevention of Adolescent Substance Abuse

In conclusion, the current review of evidence supports a pressing need for early, broad and culturally informed prevention and intervention efforts aimed at youth/ adolescents with substance use problems. Given the serious psychological, education, economic and public health consequences of addiction, investment in preventive adolescent health systems should be recognised as a national priority with the potential to deliver inter-generational benefits.

Conclusion

Substance abuse among youth and adolescents has emerged as a major and increasingly complex public health challenge that demands urgent multidisciplinary attention at individual, family, institutional, community, and policy levels. Adolescence represents a transitional developmental stage characterized by rapid biological maturation, neurocognitive development, emotional fluctuations, identity formation, experimentation, and heightened vulnerability to environmental influences. During this period, exposure to psychoactive substances such as tobacco, alcohol, cannabis, opioids, inhalants,

stimulants, and emerging synthetic drugs may profoundly alter physical, psychological, behavioural, and social trajectories. Early initiation of substance use substantially increases the risk of long-term dependence, psychiatric morbidity, educational underachievement, risky behaviour, interpersonal conflict, and chronic medical illnesses, thereby producing lasting consequences extending into adulthood.

The present review demonstrates that adolescent substance abuse cannot be explained through a single causal pathway, but rather results from a dynamic interaction of biological predisposition, psychosocial determinants, family structure, peer influence, academic pressure, emotional distress, social media exposure, and broader socioeconomic transitions. Adolescents experiencing adverse childhood events, dysfunctional parenting, family instability, social neglect, bullying, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, or poor coping mechanisms are disproportionately vulnerable to experimentation and subsequent addiction. Furthermore, rapidly changing social environments, increasing urbanization, digital connectivity, commercialization of addictive products, and evolving peer cultures have collectively intensified exposure to substance-related behaviours among young populations, particularly in low- and middle-income settings such as India.

The neurobiological basis of addiction further emphasizes the seriousness of adolescent substance exposure. During adolescence, brain regions involved in reward processing, emotional regulation, and impulsivity mature earlier than executive decision-making pathways, creating an imbalance that favors sensation-seeking and risk-taking behaviour. Psychoactive substances activate dopaminergic reward circuits, reinforcing pleasurable experiences and increasing vulnerability to repeated use and compulsive consumption. Persistent substance exposure during these formative years may impair executive functioning, concentration, emotional regulation, judgment, impulse control, and memory, adversely influencing academic achievement, social relationships, and occupational potential later in life. In addition, coexisting psychiatric conditions such as depression, anxiety disorders, self-harm behaviour, conduct disorders, and suicidal ideation frequently complicate the clinical picture and necessitate integrated mental health approaches.

The societal consequences of adolescent substance abuse are equally profound. Increased school absenteeism, poor scholastic performance, violence, delinquency, criminal behaviour, road traffic injuries, unsafe sexual practices, sexually transmitted infections, family conflict, and social marginalization collectively contribute to diminished quality of life and increased public health expenditure. Substance abuse among adolescents also perpetuates cycles of poverty,

social disadvantage, and reduced workforce productivity, thereby affecting not only individual well-being but also national socioeconomic development. Consequently, failure to address adolescent substance abuse risks generating a substantial burden on healthcare systems, educational institutions, criminal justice frameworks, and social welfare services.

Prevention remains the most effective and economically sustainable strategy for addressing substance abuse among youth and adolescents. Preventive efforts should begin early and adopt a life-course approach integrating schools, families, healthcare institutions, and communities. School-based health education programs should focus on improving substance-related awareness, emotional resilience, coping mechanisms, life skills, peer resistance strategies, stress management, and decision-making abilities. Adolescents should receive age-appropriate, culturally sensitive, evidence-based education regarding the harmful consequences of substance use rather than fear-based or punitive messaging alone. Teachers, school counsellors, paediatricians, psychiatrists, and community health workers must be equipped to identify behavioural warning signs and initiate timely interventions before experimentation progresses to dependency.

Parental involvement and family-centered interventions represent another crucial dimension of prevention. Positive parenting practices characterized by emotional support, open communication, supervision, healthy discipline, and psychological reassurance can substantially reduce vulnerability to risky behaviours. Families should be educated regarding early behavioural indicators of substance misuse, including social withdrawal, declining academic performance, sleep disturbances, mood changes, aggression, secrecy, and changing peer groups. Family therapy, counselling, and psychosocial support mechanisms may further strengthen protective environments for vulnerable adolescents.

Healthcare systems in India must prioritize adolescent-friendly and youth-centered services that integrate mental health screening, addiction counselling, rehabilitation support, behavioural therapy, and community outreach. Existing national programs, including school health initiatives and adolescent health services, should expand their focus toward structured substance abuse prevention and early detection models. Integration of screening tools within routine adolescent healthcare visits, digital mental health platforms, tele-counselling systems, and peer-support interventions may improve accessibility, particularly in underserved rural and semi-urban populations. Simultaneously, strict regulation of tobacco advertising, alcohol marketing, online promotion of harmful products,

and digital exposure to substance-related content should be strengthened to minimize normalization of addictive behaviours among impressionable youth.

Public health strategies should further emphasize community participation and multisectoral collaboration. Effective intervention requires cooperation among educational institutions, families, healthcare professionals, law enforcement agencies, social welfare systems, policymakers, media organizations, and civil society groups. Community-based awareness campaigns, peer-led interventions, school mental health initiatives, youth counselling centres, and anti-stigma approaches may collectively contribute toward healthier adolescent environments and increased help-seeking behaviour.

Future research should prioritize longitudinal investigations examining evolving substance use patterns, emerging synthetic substances, psychosocial vulnerabilities, digital behavioural influences, and culturally tailored intervention strategies among Indian adolescents. Greater emphasis on region-specific epidemiological studies, school-based surveillance systems, and implementation science approaches may further strengthen policy formulation and healthcare planning.

In conclusion, adolescent substance abuse represents a preventable yet escalating challenge requiring sustained public health commitment and evidence-based action. A comprehensive approach integrating prevention, early diagnosis, counselling, rehabilitation, parental engagement, school participation, community support, and legislative measures is essential for reducing substance dependence and improving adolescent health outcomes. Investing in youth-centered prevention strategies today offers substantial long-term benefits by safeguarding mental health, educational achievement, social stability, productivity, and quality of life for future generations. Sustained collaboration among healthcare professionals, educators, families, and policymakers will remain fundamental to creating safer environments that enable adolescents to transition into healthy, resilient, and productive adulthood.

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