

Performance-enhancing drugs and your teen athlete

By Mayo Clinic Staff

Is your teenager involved in athletics? If so, you need to know about the dangers of performance-enhancing drugs and supplements.

Are you the parent of a student athlete? If you are, your life is probably as hectic as your child's. But in your daily rounds of carpools, practices and games, have you taken the time to talk to your child about the dangers of performance-enhancing drugs? Pro athletes and Olympians aren't the only ones lured by the promise of a shortcut to increased strength and stamina. Kids in high school and middle school are using these products, too. And your child could be among them.

What are performance-enhancing drugs and supplements?

Performance-enhancing drugs and supplements are used to boost athletic performance, ward off fatigue and enhance physical appearance. They're also taken to increase muscle mass and strength. But they can cause serious harm. Here's a look at some of the substances your son or daughter might be using.

* **Creatine.** Creatine is a naturally occurring compound in the body that is also sold as an over-the-counter supplement. It's primarily used to enhance recovery after a workout and increase muscle mass and strength. Creatine is popular with athletes who participate in sports in which short bursts of power are required. Examples include football, gymnastics, hockey and wrestling. Side effects include weight gain, nausea and muscle cramps. High doses of creatine have the potential to harm the kidneys.

* **Anabolic steroids.** Anabolic steroids are synthetic versions of testosterone. They build muscle and increase strength, and are particularly popular with bodybuilders and football players. Anabolic steroids can halt bone growth and result in a permanently short stature, so they're particularly dangerous for still-growing adolescents. Steroids can also damage the heart and liver.

* **Steroid precursors.** Steroid precursors, such as androstenedione ("andro") and dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA), are substances that the body converts into anabolic steroids. They are used to increase muscle mass.

The Anabolic Steroid Control Act of 2004 made most steroid precursors illegal without a prescription. DHEA is the only one that is still available in over-the-counter preparations. Side effects of steroid precursors are similar to those for steroids.

Why do teens take them?

Teens tend to deny their mortality and take risks that more mature people wouldn't consider. Here are some reasons teen athletes might consider taking performance-enhancing drugs.

- * Pressure from parents or peers
- * A desire to gain muscle mass
- * A desire to be stronger
- * A negative body image
- * A tendency to compare their appearance with others', particularly those who use steroids

What you can do

Does your teen plan to compete for athletic scholarships? If so, he or she is under considerable pressure to succeed. And besides the pressure from coaches, parents and peers, teens place a lot of pressure on themselves. Not surprisingly, the pressure may contribute to the lure of performance-enhancing drugs and supplements.

Reassure your teen of your love and support — even when your child doesn't perform well in competitive sports. If you're worried that your teen may be using performance-enhancing drugs or supplements, here's what you can do:

- * **Be clear about your expectations as a parent.** Tell your teen that unless the long-term effects of performance-enhancing drugs on young athletes are known to be safe, you expect him or her to avoid them. Set rules. For example, if your son or daughter uses performance-enhancing drugs, he or she has to quit the team. Teach your teen that short-term gains can lead to long-term problems.
- * **Discuss ethics and proper training.** Athletes should compete fairly. Remind your son or daughter that using a performance-enhancing drug is similar to cheating, but even more importantly, could lead to serious health problems or even death. Another key message is that a balanced diet and rigorous training are the true keys to athletic performance. Encourage your teen to feel good about his or her sports performance.
- * **Talk with your teenager's coach.** Let the coach know you've talked with your teen and that you don't approve of performance-enhancing drugs. Ask the coach about the school's position on performance-enhancing drugs. Another option is to contact the athletic director of your local school district.
- * **Monitor your teen's purchases.** Take a close look at the over-the-counter preparations your teenager takes. Check closely to see what the ingredients are.
- * **Monitor for signs of drug use.** Signs your son may be taking anabolic steroids include increased acne and male-pattern baldness. If your daughter takes anabolic steroids, she may develop male characteristics, such as a deep voice or dark facial hair. Teens who take anabolic steroids may seem unusually moody and have angry outbursts known as 'roid rage.

All children have health education in school. But ultimately it's up to you to talk with your son or daughter about performance-enhancing drugs. Remember — teens are smart, they ask tough questions, and they tend to deny risks to their health. So do your best to convey the message that performance-enhancing drugs are risky business.

More information can be found at www.everett.k12.wa.us/athletics/Steroid%20Awareness