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## Drugs and Alcohol Take Toll on Local Teens

By Jennifer Wake

Now that Danielle Lincoln is a junior at Acalanes High School, she and her friends hang out with the seniors, and she can tell that a lot of seniors drink. Although she didn't see as much drinking among freshmen and sophomores, she says, "Friends are turning toward drinking as they get older; they consider it cool."

And while she says the recent tragedy involving 16-year-old Miramonte student Joe Loudon was "a wake-up call," she hasn't heard about Acalanes parties "getting that bad."

"After sports [events] or seasons are over, they have parties," she says. "A lot of people drink and it carries on to the next year. It's just a way to blow off steam and celebrate the end of the year."

"Teens are gonna party," says marriage and family therapist Monica Gadda. Unfortunately, Gadda has seen a growing attitude among teens (and their parents) that as long as it's just drinking, it's not a big deal.

Gadda teaches a course on alcohol and substance abuse at Saint Mary's College and has coached volleyball at Orinda Intermediate School and volunteered at Joaquin Moraga. While at the middle schools, she saw a disturbing trend. "Younger and younger people are drinking," she says. "These sixth, seventh and eighth graders would tell me, 'We're drinking just a little bit of beer . . . not smoking pot. High school kids drink; it's just what you do.'"

The 2006 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) reported that 28 percent of youth aged 12 to 20 years drank alcohol, and 19 percent reported binge drinking (more than five drinks in a sitting) - making them more susceptible to alcohol poisoning. "[If a friend is really intoxicated], you don't want them to sleep, and you need to be sure they're responsive to pain like a pinch or a slap in the face," Gadda says. "Teens will often tell friends to go take a rest, but that risks there won't be someone there if something goes wrong. Clearly, if everyone's intoxicated, who's going to notice?"

Gadda has seen another alarming trend as well: An increase in non-medical use of prescription drugs among older teens, and the combining of the two substances. "This depresses their system even more and increases their risk of death," she says. "Prescription drugs in Lamorinda are widely available and easily accessible. Stimulants are available from friends with ADHD, kids can get Tylenol with codeine, and over-the-counter medications."

Dr. Alex Stalcup is the medical director at New Leaf Treatment Center in Lafayette, and says we are dealing with an epidemic in prescription drug use. "This is a public health catastrophe," he says. "For many, many Lamorinda kids it's beyond experimentation, it's a part of their life. This is a local example of an emerging

national problem."

A recent report released by the director of the National Drug Control Policy stated that "unintentional deaths involving prescription opioids (pain relievers) increased 114 percent from 2001 to 2005, and treatment admissions increased 74 percent in a similar four-year period."

According to Stalcup, Adderall sales (the drug used to treat ADHD) are happening with kids as young as elementary school. "They think it helps them study, but it makes you high and you get the illusion you're brilliant when you take them."

The patients Stalcup sees are not troubled youth, either. "These kids are athletes and top students who tried tobacco once or twice, and know what drugs feel like. We have kids passing out in class, in blackout situations. I have one patient with an OxyContin habit equivalent to shooting up double doses of heroin, and another patient with a Xanax addiction worse than I've ever seen. This is a situation that's suffered in silence."

A key problem is that non-medical use of prescription drugs seems very innocent.

"Mom takes it for her back; Dad takes it for his neck. It must be safe, right?"

Stalcup says. "Unfortunately, prescription drugs feel way too good, and kids find out they like the pills. They hang out unsupervised in friends' family rooms, share pills and experiment quite a bit. It takes six weeks to six months or a year before it becomes a problem. Kids think, 'I can get high, sit in class, no one knows . . . I don't smell.'"

According to the NSDUH, 64 percent of teens ages 12 to 17 who have abused prescription pain relievers say they got them from friends or relatives, often without their knowledge.

Once these teens realize they have a problem, often after severe withdrawal symptoms begin to emerge, it's too late for an easy fix. But the consequences of not getting help can be dire.

This is not just another 'drug du jour,' added Stalcup. "Pain killers are life-changing drugs. Once you've crossed the line of needing the drug, you're in a new risk group. It's the most fatal addiction by far," he says. "Withdrawal symptoms (unable to control bowels, sweats, shakes and terrible pain) would bring a grown man to his knees. The brain isn't developed until age 18, so changes the drugs make on a developing brain may not be fixed. We're playing roulette with brain development."

According to the Office of National Drug Control Policy, nearly one in 10 high school seniors reported taking Vicodin in the past year without a doctor's approval. Teens are also abusing some over-the-counter drugs, primarily cough and cold remedies that contain dextromethorphan (DXM), a cough suppressant, to get high. From 1999 to 2004, there was a seven-fold increase in cases related to the abuse of DXM reported to poison control centers nationwide. Most of these cases were among 15- and 16-year-olds.

"This is a desperate situation we're in," Stalcup says. "But there is a way to treat the withdrawal symptoms. My message to kids is, please don't go through withdrawal without treatment. Get the necessary help."

For parents, Gadda says start educating kids at a young age about alcohol, substance abuse and even sex. "If you don't tell them, someone else will."

## Police Plan to be Vigilant this Weekend

Orinda Police Chief Bill French is a man on mission. "I thought I had a zero tolerance policy before, but this will be a stepped-up effort," French stated firmly regarding teen drinking and anyone drinking and driving this upcoming graduation weekend. "We will have extra patrols out, and we will be targeting high school parties and DUI enforcement." Police in Lafayette and Moraga will be paying attention as well, so residents are encouraged to celebrate safely.

## Signs of Alcohol Poisoning

According to the Mayo Clinic, treatment for alcohol poisoning consists of providing breathing support and intravenous fluids and vitamins until the alcohol is completely eliminated from the body. (Even if a person has stopped drinking, alcohol continues to be released into the blood stream and the level of alcohol in the body continues to rise.) Symptoms include: confusion, stupor, vomiting, seizures, slow breathing (less than eight breaths a minute), irregular breathing, blue-tinged skin or pale skin, low body temperature (hypothermia), and unconsciousness. It's not necessary for all of these symptoms to be present before you seek help. A person who is unconscious or can't be roused is at risk of dying. If the person is conscious, call 1-800-222-1222, and you'll automatically be routed to your local poison control center.

(All calls are confidential.)

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