



Message from the Director

Consequences of the Abuse of Anabolic Steroids

The Congressional hearings on March 17th, 2005 about the reports of anabolic steroid abuse by professional athletes, many of whom are regarded as role models by young people, highlight the fact that we are now facing a very damaging message that is becoming pervasive in our society - that bigger is better, and being the best is more important than how you get there. There is great risk that adolescents will be vulnerable to these messages about anabolic steroids and will be far less concerned about the long-term health risks to their bodies and their minds.

Anabolic steroids, which are synthetic versions of the primary male sex hormone testosterone, can be injected, taken orally, or used transdermally. These drugs are Controlled Substances that can be prescribed to treat conditions such as body wasting in patients with AIDS, and other diseases that occur when the body produces abnormally low amounts of testosterone. However, the doses prescribed to treat these medical conditions are 10 to 100 times lower than the doses that are abused for performance enhancement.

Let me be clear: while anabolic steroids can enhance certain types of performance or appearance, they are dangerous drugs, and when used inappropriately, they can cause a host of severe, long-lasting, and often irreversible negative health consequences. These drugs can stunt the height of growing adolescents, masculinize women, and alter sex characteristics of men. Anabolic steroids can lead to premature heart attacks, strokes, liver tumors, kidney failure and serious psychiatric problems. In addition, because steroids are often injected, users risk contracting or transmitting HIV or hepatitis.

Abuse of anabolic steroids differs from the abuse of other illicit substances because the initial use of anabolic steroids is not driven by the immediate euphoria that accompanies most drugs of abuse, such as cocaine, heroin, and marijuana, but by the desire of the abuser to change their appearance and performance, characteristics of great importance to adolescents. These effects of steroids can boost confidence and strength leading the abuser to overlook the potential serious long-term damage that these substances can cause.

NIDA has supported and will continue to support research that increases our understanding of the impact of steroid abuse and improves our ability to prevent abuse of these drugs. For example, NIDA funding led to the development of two highly effective programs that not only prevent anabolic steroid abuse among male and female high school athletes, but also promote other healthy behaviors and attitudes. The ATLAS (targeting male athletes) and ATHENA (targeting female athletes) programs have been adopted by schools in 29 states and Puerto Rico. Both Congress and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration have endorsed ATLAS and ATHENA as model prevention programs, which could and should be implemented in more communities throughout the country.

In addition to these prevention programs and other research efforts, NIDA also has invested in public education efforts to increase awareness about the dangers of steroid abuse. We have material on our website about steroid abuse at www.steroidabuse.gov and in April 2005 we again will distribute a "Game Plan" public service announcement designed to bring attention to abuse of anabolic steroids.

Research has shown that the inappropriate use of anabolic steroids can have catastrophic medical, psychiatric and behavioral consequences.

I hope that students, parents, teachers, coaches and others will take advantage of the information on our website about anabolic steroids abuse and join us in our prevention and education efforts. Participating in sports offers many benefits, but young people and adults shouldn't take unnecessary health risks in an effort to win.

Sincerely,

Nora D. Volkow, M.D.
Director