

## **Drug Use and Related Problems: Turkish Perspective**

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The prevalence of substance use and AIDS infection in Turkey might be considered relatively small when compared with that of several other countries; however, Turkey is increasingly confronted with psychosocial problems as a result of rapid urbanization. Immigration, economic crisis, and cultural conflicts affect the social balance considerably, exacerbating public health-related problems. This article presents an overview of studies concerning the extent of drug use and related problems, including HIV risk, in Turkey as of 2001.

According to the Turkish Ministry of Health, 7.6 percent of AIDS patients in Turkey are substance users (Ministry of Health, 2001). On the other hand, a study conducted in Turkey in 1999 found that lifetime prevalence rates of substances used among high school students were approximately 4 percent for cannabis, 8 percent for the inhalants, and 0.8 percent for heroin (Ögel et al. 2000). A similar study completed 3 years earlier reported the life time prevalence rates for cannabis and inhalant use at 3.6 percent and 3.4 percent, respectively (Yazman 1996). Study findings show that life time prevalence of substance use in Turkey tend to increase considerably.

Although the results may vary in different studies, the rate of injection drug use (especially of heroin and benzodiazepines) among substance users ranges between 30 percent and 60 percent (Ergil 1993; Yeşilbursa 1996; Ögel et al. 1999; Evren et al. 2000). Forty-three percent of injection drug users (IDUs) reported using a combination of heroin with a sedative,

hypnotic, or anxiolytic drug in their life time (Gürkaynak 2000). Injection of a mixture of ephedrine and per manganate, called maradona doping by teenagers, is growing more common among users. The average age to begin injection drug use was 27. Average age to begin injection drug use among females was found to be lower than the average age for males (Gürkaynak 2000).

Studies have found that needle-sharing rates can be as high as 36.6 percent among IDUs. In one study, 70 percent of IDUs declared that in the last 6 months they used others' injection equipment without cleaning it. In this study, frequency of use of others' injection equipment without cleaning was 1 to 3 times in a day for half of them. Two-thirds of the sample reported sharing their used injection equipment with others, and they shared their injection equipment with at least two different persons in the last 6 months (Gürkaynak 2000). Two important risk factors for sharing equipment were a closed pharmacy and being in prison (Ögel et al. 2000).

Thirty-five percent of IDUs reported that they clean their injection equipment. On the other hand, the rate of using proper needle-sterilization techniques was only 14.6 percent among the IDUs (Evren et al. 2000). Half of the subjects preferred cold water, and one-fourth preferred hot water for cleaning. There were no differences in cleaning methods among IDUs when compared by their education levels.

Most of the IDUs indicated that they acquired knowledge of AIDS from the media. Seventy-five percent of the IDUs injected drugs in their home, and it appeared that using drugs at home might lead to safer injection practices. Half of the subjects reported that they injected drugs in restrooms. Drug using Females reported more unsafe sex relations than drug using men.

Becoming injured because of drug use (OR=4,5), receiving medical help because of problems related to drug use(OR=3,5), driving under the influence of drugs(OR=3,4), stealing, committing unlawful or immoral acts (OR=2,3), selling drugs(OR=2,29), and suicide attempts (OR=3,9)were higher in injection heroin users than in non-injection heroin users (Evren, C et al. 2000).

The prevalence of HIV among heroin users in studies in Turkey was 2.8 percent (Ögel et al. 1999). In addition to HIV, hepatitis C infection tends to be a common disease transmitted by contaminated blood. The frequency of TT virus (TTV) was non drug-user group (Tamar 2000).

Street children are another growing problem in various cities of Turkey. An estimated 3,000 street children live in Istanbul. According to one study (Ogel, 2002)., prevalence of substance use among Istanbul street children was 80 percent. Most of the children preferred inhalants; however, injection drug use was not uncommon. The street children engaged in unsafe sexual practices, and most of them worked as a “rent boy” or girl. According to one study, one-third of the children said that having sex without condoms was “not a problem” for HIV. Most of them believed that sharing a glass was a causal factor for HIV (Ogel 2001, 2002). According to the results of these preliminary studies, Street children who use drugs are at very high risk for HIV and other infections.

Currently, none of the clinics in Turkey that address substance abuse or dependence offer education programs for HIV and other infections. The country lacks an AIDS prevention program specifically designed for or adapted to substance users and street children. Short term

outreach programs, which can be applied on an outpatient basis, are not available either. The figures reported here demonstrate the need for the preventive strategies to decrease transmission of AIDS among substance users in Turkey.

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