

Study: Teens taking steroids to turn fat into muscle

By Nancy Shute, NPR

Six percent of teenagers say they've used steroid drugs in the past year, according to a study in the journal *Pediatrics*.

Many teens aspire to have lean bodies and big muscles, like the professional athletes they so admire. But they don't always want (or know how) to sweat to get them. A new study finds a surprisingly high number of teens have used steroids to try to slim down and bulk up.

Six percent of teenagers say they've used steroid drugs in the past year, which is a lot higher than the 1.1 percent reported in a 2011 survey.

And it's not just boys who are trying to bulk up. Girls say they are using steroids, too, although they're using the illegal drugs less often than boys, according to researchers at the University of Minnesota and Columbia University.

They surveyed 2,793 middle and high schoolers in the Minneapolis area in 2009 and 2010. Their results appear this week in the journal *Pediatrics*.

The students were most likely to have used steroids if they were on a sports team, particularly if it involved a weight-conscious sport like gymnastics or ballet.

But perhaps the biggest surprise is that a lot of the kids trying to bulk up weren't necessarily jocks – they were overweight or obese. And they weren't just trying steroids. About one-third of the teenagers said they've tried protein powders and shakes, perhaps thinking (incorrectly) the products alone can transform fat into muscle. Overweight girls

were especially likely to try that.

It's an interesting finding, especially given how many teens have weight issues these days: The number of overweight kids and adolescents in the U.S. has almost tripled since the 1980s.

Teens of Asian ancestry were also more likely to turn to steroids than Caucasians. The study authors said their 6 percent number might be higher because about 20 percent of the study participants were Asian.

Steroids pose a big health risk for teenagers, because they can permanently stunt growth. They also cause health problems like severe acne and jaundice.

The good news is most of the teenagers did also try the two proven, and healthy, ways to build muscle. They exercised more, and changed their eating habits.

Both parents and pediatricians need to be aware that teenagers may consider steroids a legitimate way to gain muscle. Encouraging them to be active would be great, the authors conclude, but only if they "focus on skill development, fitness, and general health rather than development of a muscular appearance."