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'One in 10 teens faces addiction'

By Celia Hall, Medical Editor
Last Updated: 1:37am BST 28/03/2007

More than 72,500 teenagers and people in their early twenties have serious drug problems, regularly using crack cocaine and heroin, warns an official report today.

Hundreds of thousands more - as many as one in 10 children and young people - are vulnerable to becoming addicts, says the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (Nice).

The Government agency estimates that abuse of class-A drugs costs £15.4 billion a year in England and Wales.

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"We have to act in a more proactive way," said Prof Mike Kelly, director of Nice's Centre for Public Health. To do nothing is to close our eyes to a huge amount of human suffering and to the enormous costs to us as a society and to the Exchequer.

The British Crime Survey 2003-2004 said 72,791 young people aged 15 to 24 in England used opiates and/or crack cocaine. Nice estimates that a further five to 10 per cent of under-25s are at risk.

Those most at risk of developing a problem include children living in drug-abusing families, those with behavioural and mental-health problems, children excluded from school, truants, offenders, children in care and

some from ethnic minorities.

Nice wants those children and their parents or carers to be offered family therapy. The agency has not costed its recommendations yet, but family therapy can cost £5,000 to £10,000 per "qualy", that is the amount that has to be spent per person to gain one year of high quality life.

Dr Catherine Law of the Institute of Child Health, London, said there was good evidence to show that it was cost-effective to intervene at an early stage and prevent children becoming addicts.

However, Dr Gill Morgan, chief executive of the NHS Confederation, said: "Primary care trusts plan their expenditure some 18 months in advance and so when new guidance is issued, and no new funding provided, it inevitably creates difficulties."

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