

Performance Enhancing Drugs: Attitudes & Usage

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Attitudes toward Performance Enhancing Drug Use: An Encyclopedic Overview

The study of attitudes toward the use of **Performance Enhancing Drugs (PEDs)** in sport constitutes a complex intersection of psychology, ethics, sociology, and physiology. PEDs are generally defined as substances or methods used by athletes to improve athletic performance, ranging from anabolic steroids and human growth hormone to blood doping techniques. Attitudes surrounding these substances are rarely monolithic; they exist on a continuum shaped by cultural norms, competitive environments, perceived necessity, and deeply ingrained moral frameworks. Understanding these attitudes is crucial, as they serve as powerful predictors of behavioral intent, influencing whether an athlete chooses to comply with anti-doping regulations or engage in illicit substance use. Furthermore, societal attitudes reflect broader concerns regarding the integrity of competition, the health and safety of competitors, and the fundamental value placed on fair play. This entry explores the multifaceted psychological, ethical, and social determinants that shape individual and collective attitudes toward PED use in contemporary high-performance sport.

The evolution of attitudes toward PEDs has mirrored the professionalization and commercialization of sport. Historically, certain performance-boosting substances were tolerated or even encouraged, but the dramatic increase in the efficacy and danger of synthetic compounds beginning in the mid-20th century catalyzed a shift toward strict prohibition. This shift established a fundamental tension: the relentless pursuit of human limits, which is celebrated in sport, versus the moral imperative to achieve success through natural ability and dedication. Consequently, attitudes are often polarized between those who view PED use as an inevitable byproduct of extreme competition--a necessary evil to remain competitive--and those who uphold a zero-tolerance stance based on the principles of **sportsmanship** and **equality of opportunity**. This duality makes the formation and modification of attitudes a central challenge for anti-doping organizations globally, requiring sophisticated interventions that address both conscious beliefs and underlying motivational structures.

Crucially, attitudes are not static; they are dynamic constructs influenced by exposure, education, and social reinforcement. For many athletes, the initial attitude toward doping may be strongly negative, aligning with institutional rules. However, prolonged exposure to high-pressure environments, coupled with the perception that competitors are doping successfully, can lead to a gradual normalization of the behavior. This process involves cognitive reframing, where the athlete's initial moral objection is softened by rationalizations related to competitive equity or systemic pressure. Analyzing these shifting attitudes requires moving beyond simple self-report surveys to incorporate implicit measures, which reveal the unconscious biases and internalized social norms that truly govern decision-making when the stakes are highest.

The Ethical and Moral Dimensions of PED Use

The most significant component shaping attitudes toward doping revolves around ethical considerations, particularly the concept of **fair play**. Attitudes that condemn PED use are typically rooted in the belief that doping fundamentally undermines the integrity of competition by creating an unfair advantage that is not based on skill, training, or dedication. This perspective holds that sport serves as a meritocracy, and substances that artificially elevate performance violate the implicit contract between competitors and spectators. Proponents of this view argue that if performance enhancement becomes entirely reliant on pharmacological intervention, the human element--the struggle, the dedication, the pure athletic achievement--is diminished or rendered meaningless. Consequently, negative attitudes often correlate strongly with a high internal locus of control and a strong commitment to moral reasoning within the sporting context.

However, the ethical landscape is complicated by arguments suggesting that the distinction between "natural" enhancement and pharmacological intervention is arbitrary. Athletes who adopt more permissive attitudes sometimes rationalize their choices by pointing to the widespread use of legal performance enhancers, such as sophisticated training techniques, specialized nutrition, and advanced equipment. They may argue that if the goal of elite sport is to achieve the absolute pinnacle of human capability, and if certain substances can mitigate injury or accelerate recovery, then prohibiting them merely restricts human potential unnecessarily. This attitude often relies on a philosophical perspective that prioritizes achievement and performance outcome over adherence to traditional, and perhaps outdated, notions of natural sport. The debate often centers on where the line should be drawn: Is it the intent to enhance, or the method used?

A further moral dimension concerns the health risks associated with PED use. Negative attitudes are strongly reinforced by awareness of the severe, long-term health consequences linked to many prohibited substances, including cardiovascular damage, liver toxicity, and psychological disturbances. The ethical responsibility of anti-doping bodies is not only to ensure fair competition but also to protect the athletes themselves, particularly young athletes who may lack the maturity to fully comprehend the risks. Attitudes that favor prohibition often emphasize the concept of **informed consent**, arguing that the competitive pressure inherent in elite sport often compromises an athlete's ability to freely and rationally consent to the use of dangerous substances, thereby shifting the moral burden onto coaches, administrators, and governing bodies.

Social and Cultural Influences on Doping Attitudes

Attitudes toward PED use are profoundly shaped by the athlete's immediate social environment and the broader cultural context of their sport. The culture of winning, especially in highly commercialized sports, exerts immense pressure, often fostering an environment where doping is tacitly accepted as a necessary strategy for success. If an athlete perceives that their peers,

coaches, or support staff hold permissive attitudes--or worse, actively encourage doping--their own moral resistance is likely to erode. Research consistently demonstrates that **descriptive norms** (what others are doing) and **injunctive norms** (what others approve of) are powerful predictors of doping behavior. In cultures where success is defined solely by medals and records, the attitude shifts from "Doping is wrong" to "Doping is what successful people do."

The role of the coach is particularly salient in shaping athlete attitudes. Coaches often serve as crucial gatekeepers of information and moral guidance. If a coach adopts a utilitarian attitude, prioritizing competitive success above ethical concerns or long-term health, this attitude is likely to be internalized by the athlete, particularly those who are younger or highly dependent on the coach for validation and career progression. Conversely, coaches who strongly advocate for clean sport and emphasize developmental goals over immediate outcomes can cultivate resilient negative attitudes toward doping, even in high-pressure environments. The institutional attitude--the policies and enforcement mechanisms employed by teams and national federations--also signals the true priority of the organization, influencing whether athletes perceive anti-doping rules as genuine moral guidelines or merely bureaucratic hurdles to be circumvented.

Beyond the immediate sporting circle, media representation and public discourse significantly influence attitudes. Sensationalized media coverage of doping scandals often creates a public attitude of moral outrage and condemnation, yet the same media simultaneously celebrates athletes who achieve seemingly impossible feats, sometimes creating a cognitive dissonance where the public demands perfection while simultaneously ignoring the potential means required to achieve it. Furthermore, national attitudes play a role, particularly when sport is intertwined with **national identity** and geopolitical competition. In contexts where success brings significant national pride and financial reward, the pressure on athletes is magnified, and the collective societal attitude may subtly tolerate or excuse doping if it leads to international triumph.

Psychological Factors and Athlete Rationalization

Psychological factors play a critical role in mediating the relationship between external pressures and the decision to use PEDs. Athletes with certain psychological profiles, such as those high in perfectionism, low in moral disengagement, or possessing a strong **ego-orientation** (focusing on outperforming others rather than mastering a skill), are often more vulnerable to developing permissive attitudes toward doping. The fear of failure, coupled with immense performance anxiety, can lead to the belief that doping is the only viable path to maintaining status or achieving career goals. This psychological distress acts as a powerful motivator, overriding initial ethical reservations.

One of the most studied psychological mechanisms related to doping attitudes is **moral disengagement**. This theory, developed by Albert Bandura, describes the process by which

individuals restructure their moral obligations to justify unethical actions. Athletes who engage in doping often utilize specific techniques of moral disengagement to maintain a positive self-image despite violating rules. These techniques include:

Moral Justification: Framing doping as necessary for the greater good, such as maintaining competitive equity if "everyone else is doing it."

Euphemistic Labeling: Using benign language to mask the severity of the action (e.g., referring to doping as "supplement use" or "advanced recovery").

Advantageous Comparison: Comparing one's own doping to more severe or harmful actions committed by others, thereby minimizing the perceived transgression.

Diffusion or Displacement of Responsibility: Blaming the coach, team doctor, or the systemic pressure of the sport for forcing the decision.

These cognitive strategies allow the athlete to shift their initial negative attitude toward doping into a more neutral or even positive one, facilitating the behavior. The development of permissive attitudes is often a gradual process rooted in self-deception and the need to cope with overwhelming competitive stress. Therefore, effective psychological interventions must aim to strengthen moral identity and challenge these rationalization processes before they fully take hold, promoting attitudes based on intrinsic motivation and integrity rather than extrinsic reward and fear.

The Role of Governing Bodies and Policy in Shaping Attitudes

The policies and enforcement strategies implemented by organizations like the **World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA)** and National Anti-Doping Organizations (NADOs) fundamentally shape institutional and individual attitudes. The establishment of the WADA Code, based on the principle of **strict liability**, dictates that athletes are personally responsible for any prohibited substance found in their bodies, regardless of intent. This strict approach is designed to foster an attitude of extreme caution and responsibility among athletes, forcing them to meticulously vet all substances and supplements. The underlying attitude promoted by this policy is one of vigilance and self-regulation.

However, the enforcement structure can also generate cynical or resentful attitudes. When athletes perceive anti-doping procedures as overly intrusive, unfairly applied, or ineffective in catching high-profile cheats, their respect for the system diminishes. Attitudes shift from accepting the rules as necessary safeguards to viewing the rules as obstacles designed to catch the unwary rather than deter the determined. The mandatory whereabouts requirements, for instance, while necessary for effective out-of-competition testing, are often cited by athletes as an infringement on personal liberty, fostering negative attitudes toward the anti-doping framework itself. This tension between

necessary control and perceived intrusion is a constant challenge for policy makers.

Furthermore, the policy regarding sanctions heavily influences attitudes toward risk. Attitudes that favor doping are often calculated risks based on the perceived likelihood of detection versus the magnitude of the potential reward. If sanctions are viewed as too lenient, or if the financial rewards of cheating outweigh the penalties (even if caught), the attitude toward doping becomes pragmatic and risk-tolerant. Conversely, severe, consistently applied sanctions--especially lifetime bans for repeat offenders--are designed to cultivate strongly negative, deterrent attitudes across the sporting community. Effective policy, therefore, must balance the need for fairness and due process with the necessity of maintaining robust deterrence to protect the integrity of clean sport.

Public Perception Versus Athlete Perception

A significant divergence often exists between the general public's attitudes toward PED use and the attitudes held by elite athletes. The public, often viewing sport from a distance, tends to hold highly idealistic, zero-tolerance attitudes, demanding purity and moral perfection from athletic heroes. When a doping scandal breaks, public reaction is typically characterized by betrayal, moral outrage, and a demand for severe punishment. This public attitude is largely driven by the symbolic role of sport as a representation of honest effort and human potential achieved through clean means.

In contrast, the athlete's perspective is grounded in the lived reality of hyper-competition, financial precarity, and the constant pressure to perform at an unsustainable level. While many athletes maintain strong anti-doping attitudes, others develop more nuanced, sometimes conflicted, views. They may understand the moral argument against doping but feel trapped by systemic pressures, leading to an attitude of fatalism or resignation. For an athlete competing against individuals they suspect are doping, the attitude can shift from moral condemnation to a perceived necessity to "level the playing field," even if it means resorting to prohibited methods. This dichotomy highlights the need for public education that moves beyond simplistic moral judgments to acknowledge the systemic forces that contribute to doping behavior.

The shift in attitudes following a doping confession is also revealing. Initially, the public attitude is punitive. However, if the athlete expresses sufficient remorse, acknowledges systemic flaws, or becomes an advocate for clean sport, public attitudes can soften, moving toward forgiveness or understanding. This flexibility in attitude suggests that the public is not merely concerned with the act of cheating itself, but also with the perceived sincerity and subsequent rehabilitation of the athlete. For the athlete, changing their own attitude from one of denial or justification to one of acceptance and advocacy is often a crucial step in psychological recovery and reentry into the sporting community.

Future Directions and Intervention Strategies

Future efforts to foster universally negative and robust attitudes toward PED use must move beyond simple punitive measures and focus on comprehensive educational and psychological interventions. Educational programs must transcend mere lists of prohibited substances and instead focus on strengthening ethical reasoning, promoting intrinsic motivation, and developing coping strategies for competitive pressure. The goal is to cultivate an internal moral compass that makes the athlete resistant to the temptation of doping, even when faced with significant external pressure.

Effective interventions must also address the social environment that shapes attitudes. This involves creating accountability systems for coaches and support staff, ensuring that organizational attitudes explicitly prioritize athlete well-being and clean competition over immediate results. Strategies include implementing mandatory ethical training for all members of the athlete's entourage and fostering a culture of open communication where athletes feel safe reporting doping pressures without fear of reprisal. This systemic approach aims to dismantle the cultural norms that currently permit or encourage permissive attitudes toward enhancement.

Finally, research must continue to explore the implicit attitudes that predict doping behavior. Traditional self-report measures may be flawed due to the social desirability bias--athletes know they should express negative attitudes toward doping, even if their underlying beliefs are more permissive. Utilizing methods such as the Implicit Association Test (IAT) can provide deeper insights into the unconscious biases and internalized rationalizations that govern behavior. By understanding these implicit attitudes, interventions can be tailored to target the non-conscious psychological drivers of doping, ultimately strengthening the commitment to clean sport and ensuring the long-term integrity of athletic competition.