

More than six percent of US teens take psychiatric meds

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ADHD, depression most common conditions reported by those on medication.

(HealthDay)—Slightly more than 6 percent of U.S. teens take prescription medications for a mental health condition such as depression or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), a new survey shows.

The survey also revealed a wide gap in psychiatric drug use across ethnic and racial groups.

Earlier studies have documented a rise in the use of these medications among teens, but they mainly looked at high-risk groups such as children who have been hospitalized for psychiatric problems.

The new survey provides a snapshot of the number of adolescents in the general population who took a psychiatric drug in the past month from

2005 to 2010.

Teens aged 12 to 19 typically took drugs to treat depression or ADHD, the two most common [mental health](#) disorders in that age group. About 4 percent of kids aged 12 to 17 have experienced a bout of depression, the study found.

Meanwhile, 9 percent of children aged 5 to 17 have been diagnosed with ADHD, a behavioral disorder marked by difficulty paying attention and impulsive behavior.

Males were more likely to be taking medication to treat ADHD, while females were more commonly taking medication to treat depression. This follows patterns seen in the diagnosis of these conditions across genders.

Exactly what is driving the new numbers is not clear, but "in my opinion, it's an increase in the diagnosis of various conditions that these medications can be prescribed for," said study author Bruce Jonas. He is an epidemiologist at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS).

But these are stressful times and it is also possible that children are becoming more vulnerable to these conditions as a result. "The recession and various world events might be a contributing factor," Jonas speculated.

"Adolescents and children do take [psychiatric medications](#). It is not the majority, but it's also not rare," he said. "There are many ways to treat mental health problems and mood disorders in adolescents, and medication is just one of them."

A mental-health expert not involved with the new study cautioned that

psychiatric drugs are not a cure-all.

"Using psychiatric medication is always a serious thing. You want to do it carefully and not use them inappropriately," said Dr. Glenn Saxe, chair of child and adolescent psychiatry at NYU Langone Medical Center in New York City. "If a parent is concerned that their child may have a [mental health problem](#), see your pediatrician and get their advice."

The next step, Saxe said, may be a thorough evaluation by a mental health professional. "It is important that there is no other explanation for the problem or symptoms and to explore all treatment options, not just medication," he said. Other conditions may respond better to other types of therapy either with or without medication, explained Saxe, who is also director of the Child Study Center at NYU Langone Medical Center.

Of those teens taking a single psychiatric medication in the survey, roughly one-half had seen a [mental health professional](#) during the past year, the findings showed. Saxe noted that many pediatricians are adept at handling common mental health problems in adolescents and children.

The survey showed that white teens were much more likely to be taking a psychiatric drug when compared to blacks or Mexican-Americans, 8.2 percent versus 3.1 percent and 2.9 percent, respectively. "I thought there would be differences, but I was surprised by the magnitude," study author Jonas said. This gap may be due to lack of access to health care or other economic issues.

Location may also play a role, another mental-health expert said.

"Where I practice, minority children are the majority because we are housed in a major urban area that is easily accessible by many types of transportation," said Dr. Rose Alvarez-Salvat, a child psychologist at Miami Children's Hospital.

She is hopeful that other cities and states will soon catch up and help bridge this divide. "Most parents will know when there is something going on with their child," Alvarez-Salvat said. "They just need to be vigilant and be proactive and seek out resources in their area."

The findings are published in the December issue of the CDC's *NCHS Data Brief*.

More information: Learn more about [child and adolescent mental health](#) at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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