

Non-academic young people take brain stimulants more frequently than students

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Three per cent of young men in Switzerland take cognitive enhancement drugs at least once each year. Students hope this consumption will improve their exam performance, while their non-academic contemporaries seek primarily to remain awake for longer. These are the conclusions reached by a study supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF).

"Brain stimulants", "Neuroenhancers" and "Smart Pills" – the terms used for chemical-induced cognitive enhancement are numerous. While these substances are actually intended for use in the treatment of attention

disorders, Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, they are often taken for other purposes. In the USA, one in every 20 [students](#) uses drugs such as Ritalin or Prozac at least once a year, despite not actually suffering from an [attention deficit disorder](#) or from depression. What is the situation in Switzerland?

Less than in the USA

Researchers led by Gerhard Gmel at the University Hospital Lausanne (CHUV) surveyed [young men](#) called up for conscription to the army recruitment centres in Lausanne, Windisch and Mels, on the frequency of and reasons for their use of [cognitive enhancers](#). In a recently published evaluation, the researchers find that the use of cognitive enhancers in Switzerland is less prevalent than in the USA; only 180 of 5,967 participants in the study (around three per cent) had used brain-stimulating drugs at least once in the previous year.

Exams and partying

The researchers detected large differences between students and non-academics of the same age. On average, students take various cognitive enhancers five times a year. Their primary aim is to improve performance, for example in exams. Their non-academic contemporaries take drugs almost weekly, or around 40 times a year on average; most use Ritalin and other drugs that are prescribed for attention disorders. Their main motivation is to remain awake for longer, at parties, for example.

New prevention strategies

Gmel and his team believe the new figures reveal a need to widen the focus of studies into the consumption of cognitive enhancers. So far,

attention has been primarily oriented towards (US-based) students. However, in Switzerland cognitive enhancers are being used to a greater extent by non-academics, for whom new prevention strategies will need to be developed.

[The C-Surf cohort study](#)

Consumption of addictive substances among juveniles and young adults living in Switzerland is more frequent on average than in other European countries. The Cohort Study on Substance Use Risk Factors (C-Surf) is looking into the reasons and opportunities for prevention. With funding from the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), and under the leadership of the University Hospital Lausanne (Centre hospitalier universitaire vaudois, CHUV) and the Institute for Social and Preventive Medicine (ISPM) at the University of Zurich, C-Surf studies young men over a period of at least ten years.

More information: Stéphane Deline, Stéphanie Baggio, Joseph Studer, Alexandra N'Goran, Marc Dupuis, Yves Henchoz, Meichun Mohler-Kuo, Jean-Bernard Daepfen and Gerhard Gmel (2014). "Use of Neuroenhancement Drugs: Prevalence, Frequency and Use Expectations in Switzerland." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 11: 3032-3045

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