

ADHD stimulant drug abuse common among young adults: survey

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Reasons for misuse include pressure to succeed at school or work.

(HealthDay)—Nearly one in every five college students abuses prescription stimulants, according to a new survey sponsored by the Partnership for Drug-Free Kids. The survey also found that one in seven non-students of similar age also report abusing stimulant medications.

Young adults aged 18 to 25 report using the drugs to help them stay awake, study or improve their work or school performance. The most commonly abused stimulants are those typically prescribed for attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), such as Adderall, Ritalin and Vyvanse, the survey found.

"The findings shed a new and surprising light on the young adult who is abusing prescription stimulants," said Sean Clarkin, director of strategy

and program management for the Partnership for Drug-Free Kids.

"While there is some 'recreational' abuse, the typical misuser is a male [college student](#) whose grade point average is only slightly lower than that of non-abusers, but who is juggling a very busy schedule that includes academics, work and an active social life."

Clarkin said the findings point to the need for parents and educators to increase their efforts to help young people develop effective time-management skills to balance academics, work and social activities.

"The profile that emerges is less that of an academic 'goof-off' who abuses prescription stimulants to make up for lost study time than a stressed out multitasker who is burning the candle at both ends and trying to keep up," Clarkin said.

The nationally representative study, conducted by independent researcher Whitman Insight Strategies, surveyed more than 1,600 young adults online this past summer, including approximately 1,000 college students.

Half of the students reported they took stimulant drugs to study or improve their academic performance, the survey noted. And, the survey found that two-thirds of those students believed the drugs helped them get a better grade or be more competitive at school or work. Around 40 percent took the drugs to stay awake. About a quarter of abusers said they took the stimulants to improve their work performance, according to the study.

These are the same reasons former user Linda Stafford said she began using the drugs.

Stafford began taking Adderall and Vyvanse without any prescriptions while she was a college student in Statesboro, Ga.

"I wanted to go to school, work and party, and Adderall helped me to focus pretty well at first," Stafford said. In reality, however, she said taking the stimulant did not change her test grades much. "Then," she said, "I got hooked."

Stafford began experiencing depression, paranoia and social anxiety and became unable to communicate even with her closest loved ones, she said.

"I was totally incapable of handling life," Stafford said. "I could not manage a simple job, my class assignments or relationships. Adderall was the center of my life."

Stafford has since been through recovery and uses a support network and support groups to manage, but her story is one that Miami University staff psychiatrist Dr. Josh Hersh has heard often.

"These survey findings have confirmed a lot of the things I have seen clinically," Hersh said. "Young adults are mainly using prescription stimulants to improve academic and work performance and to stay awake."

Although Hersh said some of the students taking these drugs may feel the invulnerability of youth, others are simply desperate to juggle everything even while they know the possible risks of taking the drugs, such as anxiety or panic attacks even with occasional use.

"The fact that [students](#) often use these drugs around deadlines, when their natural adrenaline is already high, elevates the risk even more," Hersh said. "Sporadic use can lead to severe sleep deprivation and cause stimulant-induced psychosis, when a student gets paranoid and may hallucinate."

He said snorting the pills can lead to internal nasal damage and regular use can lead to addictions that are destructive and difficult to treat.

Even [young adults](#) who are legally prescribed stimulants for specific health conditions can risk becoming more addicted, as happened to the son of Kathleen Dobbs, a retiree who co-founded the grass roots coalition Parent to Parent, Inc.

Her son was diagnosed with ADHD at age 8 and began taking Ritalin at age 10, but by high school doctors switched him to various other drugs before Dobbs requested no more prescriptions. By then, however, he was seeking out Ritalin from classmates and then moved on to cocaine to "feel normal," Dobbs said.

"Children with ADHD will do anything to fit in, to be able to learn and be like other kids," said Dobbs, adding that the addiction tore their family apart. "When you have a child who is addicted, it is like a bomb goes off in your home and everyone scatters. I prayed and did all the right things, but it creeps into your life and destroys your entire family and leaves you with pain and loss."

Her son is now married, sober and in ongoing recovery, but she recommends that parents remain vigilant and educate themselves about drugs, especially those their children are prescribed.

The survey found that 28 percent of people legally prescribed stimulants have exaggerated their symptoms to get a larger dose. The same percentage reported sharing their medicine with friends. Just over half the adults surveyed said stimulants were easy to obtain, usually from friends, and most said their friends abused them as well.

Red flags that parents can watch for in their children, Hersh said, include having dilated pupils, anxiety or manic behavior, talking about not

sleeping for days and "crashing" when home from college, such as sleeping often and having difficulty concentrating.

More information: The Partnership for Drug-Free Kids provides young adults and parents resources on preventing prescription drug abuse through the nationwide [Medicine Abuse Project](#).

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