

Antidepressant dispensing to adolescents and young adults surges during pandemic

February 26 2024



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Antidepressant dispensing to adolescents and young adults increased sharply after the COVID-19 pandemic began—particularly among females—a new study finds.

While a growing number of young people ages 12 to 25 were receiving antidepressants before the pandemic, the antidepressant dispensing rate rose nearly 64% faster after March 2020, according to Michigan Medicine led findings published in *Pediatrics*.

"Antidepressant dispensing to adolescents and [young adults](#) was already high and rising before March 2020. Our findings suggest these trends accelerated during the pandemic," said lead author Kao Ping Chua, M.D., Ph.D., a pediatrician and [researcher](#) at University of Michigan Health C.S. Mott Children's Hospital and the Susan B. Meister Child Health Evaluation and Research Center.

Researchers analyzed data from a [national database](#) reporting 92% of prescriptions dispensed in U.S. pharmacies. They found that the increase in the antidepressant dispensing rate during the pandemic was driven by females.

After March 2020, this rate increased 130% faster among female adolescents ages 12–17 years and 60% faster among female young adults ages 18–25 years.

"Multiple studies suggest that rates of anxiety and depression among [female adolescents](#) increased during the pandemic," Chua said. "These studies, coupled with our findings, suggest the pandemic exacerbated a pre-existing mental health crisis in this group."

In contrast to females, the antidepressant dispensing rate changed little among male young adults after March 2020 and declined among male adolescents, which Chua found surprising.

"It's hard to believe this decline reflects improved mental health," he said.

He believes a more likely explanation is that male adolescents may have skipped physicals and other health care visits during the pandemic, decreasing opportunities to diagnose and treat anxiety and depression.

The transition away from in-person learning, he notes, may have also decreased opportunities for teachers and other [school staff](#) to detect mental health problems in male adolescents.

Chua said the overall rise in antidepressant dispensing to adolescents and young adults may not only be related to worsened mental health. Long waitlists for psychotherapy, for example, may have also played a role.

"In my primary care clinic, I often heard from patients and families that they were facing 6–9 month wait lists for therapy during the [pandemic](#). In those situations, it didn't make sense to withhold antidepressants and recommend a therapy-only approach," he said.

Further studies, Chua says, should identify which interventions can best promote the [mental health](#) of adolescents and young adults.

More information: Antidepressant Dispensing to U.S. Adolescents and Young Adults: 2016-2022, *Pediatrics* (2024).

Provided by University of Michigan

Citation: Antidepressant dispensing to adolescents and young adults surges during pandemic (2024, February 26) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-02-antidepressant-adolescents-young-adults-surges.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.