

Nonmedical use of prescription stimulants and analgesics: Associations with academic and social behaviors among college students

MAJOR FINDINGS:

After alcohol and marijuana, nonmedical use of prescription drugs is the most prevalent type of recreational drug use in college students. This study of first-year college students examined how nonmedical use of prescription stimulants and analgesics might be related to academic performance and a variety of related behaviors, such as skipping class, studying, and socializing. As can be seen in the table below, nonmedical users typically had lower grade point averages during college (2.74 vs. 2.96) and high school (3.71 vs. 3.86), compared with their non-using counterparts. They also spent less time studying (17.2 vs. 19.7 hours per week), and more time socializing (29.4 versus 24.8 hours per week). Nonmedical users also skipped a significantly greater percentage of their classes per week (16.0% vs. 9.4%). While it is impossible to say whether or not nonmedical use caused students to achieve lower grades, results of multivariate analyses suggested that, during their first year of college, nonmedical users' lower grades were at least partially attributable to the fact that they skipped more of their classes.

Practice and Policy Suggestions: Campus health professionals and administrators should confront the issues that make prescription medications enticing to college students including the widespread availability of the drugs on college campuses and their perceived safety. Some students believe that prescription drugs are safer than “street drugs” because of their medically sanctioned uses. In addition, some students desire “smart drugs”, based on their belief that some prescription medications will aid them academically. In light of the information presented in this study, college administrators should actively promote programs that educate students about the dangers of the nonmedical use of prescription drugs to combat any myths the students might believe. Physicians should educate their patients about the risks of using prescription drugs nonmedically, especially if their patients are college students or the parents of college students.

Of major interest to:

- College Administrators
- Parents
- Educators
- Health Professionals
- Students
- Law and Policy Makers



Table 1. Comparison of academic and social behaviors among past-year nonmedical users of prescription stimulants, analgesics, or both, and nonusers

	All Nonmedical Users		Nonmedical Users		
	Nonusers <i>n</i> = 985 <i>M</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Users <i>n</i> = 267 <i>M</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Stimulants Only <i>n</i> = 117 <i>M</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Analgesics Only <i>n</i> = 85 <i>M</i> (<i>SE</i>)	Stimulants and Analgesics <i>n</i> = 65 <i>M</i> (<i>SE</i>)
Academic Performance					
High school GPA	3.86 (.03) ^{abc}	3.71 (.03) ^a	3.67 (.05) ^b	3.73 (.05) ^c	3.76 (.06)
College GPA	2.96 (.04) ^{abcd}	2.74 (.05) ^a	2.82 (.07)	2.71 (.08) ^c	2.61 (.09) ^d
Studying					
Weekdays (hours/day)	2.9 (.1) ^a	2.6 (.1) ^b	2.6 (.2)	2.6 (.2)	2.7 (.2)
Weekends (hours/day)	2.7 (.1) ^a	2.3 (.1) ^b	2.3 (.2)	2.3 (.2)	2.1 (.3)
Total (hours/week)	19.7 (.6) ^a	17.2 (.8) ^b	17.2 (1.1)	17.2 (1.2)	17.1 (1.4)
Socializing					
Weekdays (hours/day)	2.3 (.1) ^{abcd}	3.0 (.1) ^a	2.7 (.2)	3.2 (.2) ^c	3.0 (.3) ^d
Weekends (hours/day)	5.2 (.1) ^{abcd}	5.9 (.2) ^a	5.7 (.3)	6.0 (.3) ^c	6.0 (.3) ^d
Total (hours/week)	24.8 (.7) ^{abcd}	29.4 (1.0) ^a	28.0 (1.3) ^b	30.6 (1.5) ^c	30.2 (1.7) ^d
Percent of Classes Skipped	9.4 (.8) ^{bd}	16.0 (1.15) ^a	16.1 (1.5) ^b	12.6 (1.6) ^c	20.9 (2.0) ^{cd}

^{abcdefg} Groups that share the same superscript are significantly different ($p < .05$), as determined in simple pairwise comparisons of least squares means. Skipping class is computed as the proportion of class sessions skipped in a typical week (100 x number skipped / total number of classes scheduled per week). All comparisons control for the effects of race, sex, and mother's education.

The complete publication referenced in this research brief can be found here: Arria, A.M., O'Grady, K.E., Caldeira, K.M., Vincent, K.B., Wish, E.D. (2008). Nonmedical use of prescription stimulants and analgesics: Associations with social and academic behaviors among college students. *Journal of Drug Issues*. 38(4), 1045-1060.



About the College Life Study (CLS)

The CLS is a longitudinal study of 1,253 college students at a large, public, mid-Atlantic university. This study is one of the first large-scale scientific investigations that aims to discover the impact of health-related behaviors during the college experience. Any first-time, first-year student between 17 and 19 years old at the university in the fall of 2004 was eligible to participate in a screening survey. The researchers then selected students to participate in the longitudinal study, which consisted of two-hour personal interviews administered annually, beginning with their first year of college. A full description of the methods used is available.¹ Inherent to all self-reporting research methods is the possibility for response bias. Because the sample is from one large university, the ability to generalize the findings elsewhere is uncertain. However, response rates have been excellent and attrition bias has been minimal.

For more information about the study, please visit www.cls.umd.edu or contact Amelia M. Arria at the University of Maryland, College Park, at aarria@umd.edu.

¹ Arria, A.M., Caldeira, K.M., O'Grady, K.E., Vincent, K.B., Fitzelle, D.B., Johnson, E.P., Wish, E.D. (2008). Drug exposure opportunities and use patterns among college students: Results of a longitudinal prospective cohort study. *Substance Abuse*. 29(4), 19-38.

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