

Persistent nonmedical use of prescription stimulants among college students: Possible association with ADHD symptoms

MAJOR FINDINGS:

Nonmedical use of prescription stimulants (NPS) continues to be a problem among college students. By studying students who were never diagnosed with ADHD, the researchers hoped to better understand how untreated ADHD symptoms might play a role in NPS. The data show strong evidence of an association between untreated ADHD symptoms and NPS. There were significantly higher levels of ADHD symptoms among the students who had persistent NPS throughout college, as compared to students who never used illicit drugs, even controlling for demographics. This association was mainly driven by inattention symptoms of ADHD, whereas hyperactivity-impulsivity symptoms of ADHD showed no association with NPS. By contrast, unlike persistent NPS, persistent marijuana use was not related to ADHD symptoms, suggesting that NPS may be distinct from other forms of drug use in its association with ADHD symptoms.

The researchers also note that other factors may have contributed to NPS, considering that only 17% of the persistent NPS cases studied met clinical criteria for ADHD. Further research is warranted to determine what other factors may contribute to NPS such as an underlying drug problem or untreated mental health symptoms other than ADHD.

Practice and Policy Suggestions: These findings may be useful to health care professionals and prevention specialists. Clinical evaluations can be used to help assess the degree to which students who are using prescription stimulants nonmedically might be doing so as a way of self-medicating their untreated ADHD symptoms, perhaps to improve their academic performance. Additionally, clinicians who are treating students for ADHD should warn against diversion of the medications to help prevent NPS.

Of major interest to:

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



(Practice and Policy Suggestions Continued): The researchers also suggest targeting possible risk factors for NPS as a prevention strategy. Other studies have shown that heavy alcohol use, other illicit drug use, skipping class, and lowered academic performance are all risk factors for NPS, and this study shows that untreated ADHD symptoms may be an additional risk factor. In addition to targeting possible risk factors, educating students about the myths and dangers of NPS might be an effective prevention strategy. Many students believe that NPS will help improve their academic performance when in fact the opposite may be true. It is also important that students seek professional medical help rather than self-medicating their mental health symptoms. Campus-based counseling centers are a good place to begin implementing these strategies.

The complete publication referenced in this research brief can be found here: Arria, A.M., Garnier-Dykstra, L.M., Caldeira, K.M., Vincent, K.B., O'Grady, K.E., Wish, E.D. (2011). Persistent nonmedical use of prescription stimulants among college students: Possible association with ADHD symptoms. *Journal of Attention Disorders*. 15(5), 347-356.



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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