

# Nonmedical prescription analgesic use and concurrent alcohol consumption among college students

## MAJOR FINDINGS:

The researchers hoped to learn more about the extent to which alcohol use and nonmedical prescription analgesic use co-occur among the college student population. They studied a sample of 1,118 students and divided them into three groups: Alcohol-only users, non-concurrent users of alcohol and prescription analgesics (used both but not on the same day), and concurrent users (used both on the same day at least once). The 965 alcohol-only users represented a majority of the students (86.3%). There were 63 students in the non-concurrent group (5.6%) and 90 in the concurrent group (8.1%), for a total of 153 (13.7%) students who had used prescription analgesics nonmedically. The table below shows how the 3 groups compare with respect to drinking patterns.

“Overall, concurrent users tended to be heavier and more frequent drinkers than non-concurrent or alcohol-only users.” Prescription analgesic use was relatively infrequent: over the past six months 60.3% of non-concurrent users and 42.2% of concurrent users only used prescription analgesics nonmedically once. The researchers found that each additional drink per drinking day increased the likelihood that a student was a concurrent user by 18%, and each additional drinking day increased the risk by 3%.

**Practice and Policy Suggestions:** The finding that prescription analgesic use is linked to heavier alcohol consumption is consistent with prior evidence. The researchers also noted that although concurrent users had the riskiest drinking levels of the three groups studied, that non-concurrent users also had somewhat risky drinking habits. They believe that because of this evidence, prescription analgesic use could be used as a marker for students with high-risk drinking problems.

### *Of major interest to:*

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



Demographic and alcohol-use characteristics of 1,118 alcohol users, by absence or presence of nonmedical prescription analgesic use, and either concurrent or non-concurrent use with alcohol in the past six months

	Non-Users of Prescription Analgesics Alcohol Only (N = 965) n (%)	Nonmedical Prescription Analgesic Users		All Drinkers (n = 1,118) n (%)
		Non-Concurrent <sup>a</sup> (n = 63) n (%)	Concurrent <sup>b</sup> (n = 90) n (%)	
Gender*				
Male	445 (46.1%)	30 (47.6%)	55 (61.1%)	530 (47.4%)
Female	520 (53.9%)	33 (52.4%)	35 (38.9%)	588 (52.6%)
Race <sup>c,*</sup>				
White	677 (70.2%)	49 (77.8%)	78 (86.7%)	804 (71.9%)
Non-White	286 (29.6%)	14 (22.2%)	11 (12.2%)	311 (27.8%)

<sup>a</sup>Non-concurrent users used both alcohol and prescription analgesics nonmedically, but not on the same day.

<sup>b</sup>Concurrent users used alcohol and prescription analgesics nonmedically on the same day.

<sup>c</sup>Two participants from the Alcohol Only group and 1 participant from the Concurrent group had missing data for the race variable

\*Significant difference between alcohol only and concurrent users.

The complete publication referenced in this research brief can be found here: Garnier, L.M., Arria, A.M., Caldeira, K.M., Vincent, K.B., O'Grady, K.E., Wish, E.D. (2009). Nonmedical prescription analgesic use and concurrent alcohol consumption among college students. *American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse*. 35(5), 334-338.



### 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.<sup>1</sup> 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](http://www.cls.umd.edu) or contact Amelia M. Arria at the University of Maryland, College Park, at [aarria@umd.edu](mailto:aarria@umd.edu).

<sup>1</sup> 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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