

Nonmedical prescription stimulant use among college students: Why we need to do something and what we need to do

MAJOR FINDINGS:

The researchers summarized recent findings about college students' nonmedical use of prescription stimulants and outlined different possible approaches for solving this growing problem. They challenged several popular myths regarding nonmedical use of prescription stimulants, specifically the belief that prescription stimulants are "performance enhancers" or "smart drugs."

In a recent study, researchers found that 62% of college students with ADHD diverted their medication to someone without a prescription. The researchers note that college students may not realize that it is illegal to either distribute prescription drugs or to accept drugs that are not prescribed to you. Recent studies have also found that students who use prescription stimulants nonmedically have lower grade point averages, are more likely to be heavy drinkers and use other illicit drugs, skip class more frequently, and spend less time studying than nonusers of prescription stimulants. Despite the myths perpetuated in the popular media, nonmedical use of prescription stimulants should not be viewed as an isolated attempt to gain a competitive edge academically, but rather as part of a larger context of illicit and potentially problematic behaviors relating to drug and alcohol use.

Practice and Policy Suggestions: The researchers list eight different suggestions for how to prevent nonmedical use of prescription stimulants among college students. Among the suggestions is promoting awareness and de-stigmatizing college students who do not divert their prescription medications. Students, parents, physicians, college personnel including administrators and teachers, the government, and the pharmaceutical industry all have an important role to play in stopping the nonmedical use of prescription stimulants among college students.

Of major interest to:

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



(Practice and Policy Suggestions Continued): The authors caution that even though most students refrain from nonmedical drug use, it is strongly viewed as “normal,” which could lead to more students feeling pressured to follow suit. Instead, they advise that “it is the nonmedical use of drugs, including prescription stimulants, that needs to be actively discouraged and the medical use of appropriate medicines that needs to be normalized. To that end, prevention, education, and media outlets should highlight the reality that most college students do not use prescription stimulants nonmedically.”

The complete publication referenced in this research brief can be found here: Arria, A.M., DuPont, R.L. (2010). Nonmedical prescription stimulant use among college students: Why we need to do something and what we need to do. *Journal of Addictive Diseases*. 29 (4), 417-426.



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 School of Public Health 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.

This research brief was prepared by Ilana Yergin and Brittany Bugbee and disseminated by the Treatment Research Institute (TRI), a non-profit research and development group specializing in science-driven transformation of treatment and policy in substance use/abuse. Click [here](#) to learn more about TRI.

