Do college students improve their grades by using prescription stimulants nonmedically?

MAJOR FINDINGS:

Many students believe nonmedical use of prescription stimulants (NPS) will allow them to study more effectively and improve their grades. However, research indicates that for students without ADHD, prescription stimulant use without a doctor’s prescription is not associated with better grades.

Researchers analyzed NPS among 898 students without ADHD during their second and third years of college. (Individuals with an ADHD diagnosis were excluded because they might experience different effects from NPS.) Four NPS pattern groups were identified for comparison:

- **Abstainers** (68.8%) did not engage in NPS either year.
- **Persisters** (16.7%) engaged in NPS during both observed years.
- **Initiators** (8.7%) engaged in NPS in Year 3 but not in Year 2.
- **Desisters** (5.8%) engaged in NPS in Year 2 but not in Year 3.

After adjusting for sex and Year 2 GPA, there was no significant relationship between NPS pattern group and change in GPA between Years 2 and 3. Small but statistically significant improvements in GPA were seen among the Abstainers, but neither the Persisters, Initiators, nor Desisters saw any significant changes in their GPA over time.

Many students engage in NPS in response to academic difficulties, thinking these drugs will help them improve their grades, but results of this study add to the growing body of research indicating that NPS likely provides no academic benefits.

Practice and Policy Suggestions:

Prior evidence indicates that college students who engage in NPS have lower overall GPAs, skip more classes, and have higher levels of substance use than non-users. The present study indicates that NPS is not associated with improvement in GPA. Therefore, college administrators and advisors should be encouraged to implement interventions that challenge students’ beliefs that NPS is beneficial and raise awareness about the potential risks for NPS. College faculty, staff, and...
parents might also play an important role in disseminating such messages, and should be seen as possible intervention targets for raising awareness and understanding about NPS. NPS is also associated with other drug use and can act as a “red flag” for educators, health providers, and parents. Physicians who prescribe ADHD medications to college-attending patients can ensure that such patients understand that sharing or selling their medication is illegal, and likewise that it would be illegal for their friends to use ADHD medications that were not prescribed for them. College is an opportune time to change students’ misguided beliefs about the benefits of NPS and raise awareness about the health and legal consequences of NPS.

