RESEARCH BRIEF

Perceived harmfulness predicts nonmedical use of prescription drugs among college students: Interactions with sensation-seeking

MAJOR FINDINGS:

The researchers used information gathered from a sample of college students to examine the relationship between perceived harmfulness of using prescription stimulants and analgesics nonmedically and subsequent nonmedical use. They also questioned how sensation-seeking—meaning a preference for exciting and unusual experiences—might affect the relationship between perceived harmfulness and nonmedical use. The researchers used two classifications of perceived harmfulness in this study. "High perceived harmfulness" was defined as moderate or great risk. 67.4% of students had a high perceived harmfulness for stimulants and 70.2% for analgesics. "Low perceived harmfulness" was defined as slight or no risk (26.0% for stimulants and 22.8% for analgesics). Students who provided an answer of "can't say" were excluded from further analyses. Students were asked "How much do you think people risk harming themselves (physically or in other ways) if they take [drug] occasionally (nonmedically)?" Using their answers, the researchers created the table below, which shows students' perceptions about the risk of the occasional use of prescription stimulants and analgesics compared to other drugs.

Table 1. Perceptions about the risk of harm from nonmedical use of prescription drugs and other substances, among college students (weighted *N*=2,271)

	Percent of students (weighted) reporting level of risk				
	No risk	Slight risk	Moderate risk	Great risk	Can't say
Prescription stimulants	4.0	22.0	42.2	25.2	6.6
Prescription analgesics	2.0	20.8	42.4	27.8	7.0
Marijuana	14.8	47.1	29.9	7.2	1.0
Cocaine	0.8	2.9	22.0	72.2	2.1
Alcohol	8.4	35.2	38.4	17.4	0.7

Perceived harmfulness was assessed at Time 2. Frequencies were computed for 862 students who participated in all three assessments and weighted to represent the general population of screened first-year students (N_{wt}=2,271). Rows sum to 100% within rounding error. With the exception of alcohol, frequencies correspond to the perceived harmfulness associated with "occasional" nonmedical use of each drug. Perceived harmfulness of alcohol refers to having five or more drinks once or twice each weekend.

In this study, students were more likely to use prescription drugs nonmedically if they perceived little or no risk of harm. For example, students with low perceived harmfulness of prescription stimulants were 10.3 times more likely to have used stimulants nonmedically in the past year than students with a high perceived harmfulness. Students with low perceived harmfulness of prescription analgesics had similar results, as they were 9.6 times more likely to use prescription analgesics nonmedically than students with a high perceived harmfulness.

Of major interest to:

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

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The researchers then explored the second part of their question: What is the relationship between perceived harmfulness, nonmedical use, and sensation seeking? For both prescription stimulants and analgesics, the prevalence of nonmedical use was quite similar when perceived harmfulness was low, regardless of the sensation-seeking level. Students who perceived more harm were less likely to use nonmedically, especially if they also had low sensation-seeking tendencies. However, high perceived harmfulness has less influence among high sensation-seekers, especially in the case of prescription analgesics.

Practice and Policy Suggestions: The results of this study indicate that educating students about the dangers of the nonmedical use of prescription drugs—and thereby elevating their perception of harm—could prove to be effective in dissuading some students from engaging in nonmedical use. In light of the present findings, this method may not work for highly sensation-seeking students with an underlying propensity for drug use. Therefore, it is important to develop alternative prevention strategies including substituting other exciting activities for drug use.

The complete publication referenced in this research brief can be found here: Arria, A.M., Caldeira, K.M., Vincent, K.B., O'Grady, K.E., Wish, E.D. (2008). Perceived harmfulness predicts nonmedical use of prescription drugs among college students: Interactions with sensation-seeking. *Prevention Science*. 9(3), 191-201.

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.

This research brief was prepared by Ilana Yergin, University of Maryland School of Journalism