

Prescription Stimulants

The definition of “drug abuse” is not limited to illegal drugs; it also includes the use of legal drugs for a purpose other than that for which it was normally prescribed or recommended. Drug abuse occurs when an individual takes a drug for which he or she does not have a prescription, whether for recreational purposes of self-medication.

New trends are emerging on the abuse of stimulant medications normally prescribed for learning disabilities such as ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder). These medications may be illegally used by individuals because they are believed to increase alertness and concentration for purposes such as studying. The abuse of prescription stimulants, such as Ritalin or Adderall, is higher among 18 to 25 year olds than any other age group. Studies estimate that between 4 and 25 percent of college students use or have used a prescription stimulant as a study aid.

Stimulant medication abuse was most prevalent among the following demographic subgroups: men, Caucasians, members of fraternities or sororities, students earning GPAs lower than B, and students attending colleges in the Northeast with competitive admission standards. Students who abused stimulant medications also reported higher levels of cigarette smoking, heavy drinking, risky driving, and abuse of marijuana, Ecstasy (MDMA), and cocaine.

Academic institutions nationwide are grappling with the ethical, health, and legal issues surrounding the increase in student use of stimulant medications to enhance studying. Some academic leaders have argued that students using these medications without a prescription have an unfair academic advantage over the students who choose not to use these substances.

Use or abuse of stimulants can have adverse, if not deadly, consequences, including fatal heart attacks, seizures, and strokes. Unknowing individuals who have undetected cardiac disorders are especially at risk. The NCAA lists stimulants, including Ritalin and Adderall, on its list of banned substances for college athletes.

RITALIN USE

Ritalin, also known as methylphenidate, is a commonly-prescribed drug for the treatment of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Other medications containing methylphenidate and related compounds include Concerta (a timed-release medicine), Metadate, Methylin, Rubifen, and Focalin. A transdermal patch which administers methylphenidate directly into the bloodstream will soon be on the market. Ritalin is classified as a Schedule II stimulant, in the same drug class as cocaine. On college campuses, Ritalin has gained a reputation as a “study drug,” used without a prescription by some students to help them stay awake for long periods of time to study for exams. Ritalin comes in pill form, but abusers will sometimes crush up the pill and either snort or inject it.

As a psychomotor stimulant, Ritalin has a mild effect on raising heart and respiration (breathing) rates, but exerts its main influence on the neurotransmitter dopamine. The effects of increased levels of dopamine include increases locomotor movement (restlessness, jitteriness), improvement in attention, and a sense of pleasure or euphoria. Dopamine is the neurotransmitter most directly linked to addiction, which explains the strong abuse and addiction of Ritalin and its counterparts.

The side effects of Ritalin use may include:

- Nervousness and restlessness
- Insomnia
- Loss of appetite, which may lead to serious malnutrition
- Nausea and vomiting
- Dizziness and headaches
- Elevation in the heart rate and blood pressure
- Skin rashes and itching
- Abdominal pain
- Weight loss leading to malnutrition
- Digestive problems
- Toxic psychosis, psychotic episodes, drug dependence
- Severe fatigue and emotional depression when drug effects wear off

ADDERALL USE

Adderall is also a prescription psychomotor stimulant used to treat ADHD, and to a lesser extent, narcolepsy. Adderall is used illegally by some students to enhance their ability to study for long periods. Adderall is classified as a Schedule II amphetamine, in the same drug class as cocaine. Drugs in this class affect all the monoamine neurotransmitters, norepinephrine, serotonin, and dopamine. Adderall increases energy and alertness, raises blood pressure, heart rate, and body temperature, and increases feelings of pleasure and euphoria. Like cocaine, Adderall has a high abuse and addiction potential, primarily when used in a way other than that for which it was prescribed.

The side effects of Adderall use may include:

- Irregular heartbeat
- High blood pressure
- Abnormal behavior or confusion
- Restlessness
- Tremor
- Anxiety or nervousness
- Headache
- Dizziness
- Insomnia
- Dryness of the mouth and unpleasant taste in the mouth
- Diarrhea or constipation
- Impotence or changes in sex drive

SOURCES:

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