

College students say prescription stimulants easy to find on campus

October 16 2015, by Jeff Grabmeier

Seven out of 10 college students say it is somewhat or very easy to obtain controlled stimulants without a prescription, according to a new survey conducted on eight U.S. campuses.

About 18 percent of undergraduates reported misusing [prescription stimulants](#) such as Adderall, the 2015 College Prescription Drug Study (CPDS) found. The great majority (83 percent) received them from friends and most said they used the drug to help them study or improve their grades.

While stimulant use was most common, students are also misusing a variety of other prescription medications, according to the survey.

"Overall, one in four undergraduates reported that they used prescription pain medications, sedatives or stimulants for non-medical reasons in their lifetimes," said Anne McDaniel, author of the study and associate director of research and data management at The Ohio State University's Center for the Study of Student Life.

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The CPDS was conducted in spring 2015 by Ohio State's Center for the

Study of Student Life in cooperation with the university's Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Drug Misuse Prevention and Recovery (HECAOD).

The anonymous survey included 3,918 students attending six public and two private colleges and universities in five states.

The CPDS is the most comprehensive and in-depth study done on prescription drug misuse on multiple campuses, McDaniel said.

The survey included undergraduate, as well as graduate and professional students. The results for both groups were similar, although undergraduates were more likely to be misusing [prescription drugs](#).

After stimulants, pain medications were the most misused prescription medications, used by 10 percent of undergraduates. About a third of students said it was easy or very easy to obtain pain medications.

About 9 percent of undergrads used sedatives, with 44 percent saying it was easy or very easy to find them on campus.

The impetus for students to misuse prescription drugs has changed over the years, said Kenneth Hale, a clinical professor of pharmacy at Ohio State and associate director of HECAOD.

"At one time, [college students](#) most commonly misused drugs to get high," Hale said.

"But today, students also use medications to self-medicate, to manage their lives. They are using drugs to control pain, to go to sleep, to relieve anxiety and to study."

For example, 55 percent of students who misused pain medications said

they did it to relieve pain, while 46 percent said they did it to get high. More than half who misused sedatives said their aim was to get to sleep, while 85 percent who misused stimulants wanted to improve grades or studying.

Another concern about the misuse of prescription drugs is the danger of it leading to the use of illicit "street" drugs, Hale said. This is particularly true because of the recent nationwide crackdown on the misuse of prescription medications.

The survey found that slightly more than half of undergraduates who misused prescription drugs had used [illicit drugs](#) in their place at some point. The most common reason was because the illicit drugs were easier to access.

Marijuana was the most common illicit drug replacing [prescription medications](#), used by half of undergrads who misused controlled drugs, followed by cocaine and hallucinogens at 19 percent.

Nearly two percent had used heroin, which is very concerning, Hale said.

"There's been a lot of media attention given to the recent rise in heroin use and for good reason," he said.

"Research shows that the misuse of prescription pain medications can be a stepping stone to heroin, and the average age for starting the misuse of these medications falls within the traditional college years."

Moving on to illicit drugs is not the only negative consequence of prescription medication misuse, the survey found.

Depression is one side effect, noted by 20 percent of those who used pain medications, 14 percent of those using sedatives and 9 percent of

stimulant users.

Nearly a third of sedative users experienced memory loss, as did 17 percent of those who misused [pain medications](#). Between 7 and 19 percent of users said they did things they wish they hadn't as a result of their prescription drug use.

"These drugs require a prescription for a reason," McDaniel said. "Students need to be under the care and supervision of a physician when they're using these powerful medications."

Many college students may overestimate the value they get from using prescription drugs, particularly stimulants.

About two-thirds of students surveyed said stimulants had a positive effect on their academics, but that's probably not true, Hale said.

"Studies have shown that students who misuse stimulants tend to have lower GPAs," Hale said. "Some students think of them as cognitive enhancers, but they are really cognitive compensators for students who didn't go to class, didn't study and then have to stay up all night to cram for an exam."

Both McDaniel and Hale said the results of the survey show the need for more education and intervention with college [students](#) regarding prescription drug misuse.

"College is a time when many young people may start misusing prescription drugs," McDaniel said. "It is a good time for intervention."

Provided by The Ohio State University

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