



***Survey on Misuse and Abuse
of Prescription Stimulants
Among College Students and Other Young Adults***

by Partnership for Drug-Free Kids

November 13, 2014

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Background

The Partnership for Drug-Free Kids is dedicated to reducing teen substance abuse and supporting families impacted by addiction. In 2012, the Partnership launched the Medicine Abuse Project, a campaign with the goal of reducing teen prescription (Rx) drug abuse. As a part of this campaign, the Partnership sought to learn more about the behaviors, attitudes and demographics of young adults and their predisposition to abuse prescription stimulants. The main objectives of this research are to:

- Understand the differences between those who misuse and abuse prescription stimulants and those who do not.
- Assess the perceived risks and benefits of prescription stimulant abuse.
- Understand the role that a higher education environment plays in the issue.
- Investigate pressure to sell or share Rx stimulant medication among those with an Rx stimulant prescription.

The Partnership for Drug-Free Kids also plans to utilize these results to help increase the awareness of Rx stimulant abuse, develop targeted communications to reach at-risk youth, and help shape public policy around the issue.

Methodology

Survey Type	15 Minute Online Survey	
Field Dates	July 22 nd to August 3 rd 2014	
Sample Size	n = 1,621 Adults Age 18 to 25	
Student & Non-Student Sample Design	n = 1,018 Current Students <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • n = 256 Misusers/Abusers of Stimulants • n = 762 Non-Misusers/Abusers of Stimulants 	n = 603 Non-Students <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • n = 150 Misusers/Abusers of Stimulants • n = 453 Non-Misusers/Abusers of Stimulants
Misuse & Abuse Sample Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • n = 406 Total Misusers of Stimulants (including n=295 Past Year Stimulant Misusers) • n = 301 Total With Stimulant Rx Prescription 	
Weighting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The overall sample has been weighted to match U.S. Census data for age, college enrollment, gender, and race/ethnicity. • The Misuser/Abuser oversample (25% of overall sample) was weighted to within the incidence of total misuse/abuse in our primary research (17%). 	

Executive Summary

The misuse and abuse of prescription stimulants is a common behavior today among young adults ages 18 to 25, as 1 in 6 (17 percent) report engaging in the behavior at least once in their lifetime and 7 in 10 (71 percent) believe that the behavior is more widespread than other people realize.

The data show that young adults often abuse prescription stimulants as a way to manage their busy lifestyles. The reasons young people give for abusing these Rx medications revolve around functional goals such as studying, working or staying awake. These youth recognize the importance of school and work, and feel the pressure to succeed; but at the same time, they value a vibrant social life, and feel that it can become too difficult to maintain a balance between the two.

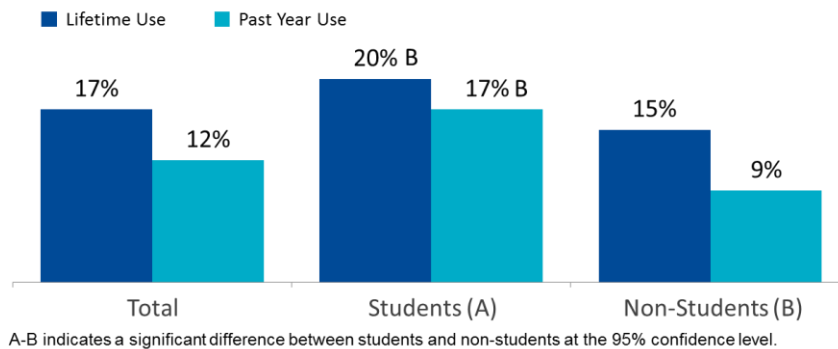
The accessibility and sociability of these drugs are making it easier for young people to become exposed to the behavior. More than half (56 percent) believe it's easy to get prescription stimulants without a prescription, and a similar proportion (58 percent) currently have a close friend who misuses or abuses prescription stimulants. In addition, those who engage in the behavior are mostly getting the drugs from their friends (and not from "dealers"), while those who have been prescribed stimulants from their doctors often exaggerate symptoms to receive larger dosages (either presumably to misuse themselves or "share" with others).

Prevalence Rate

Among young adults between the ages of 18 to 25, 1 in 6 (17 percent) has abused a prescription stimulant at least once in their lifetime; and 1 in 8 (12 percent) has done so within the past year. This behavior is also common among those who legitimately have a prescription from a physician, as half of these individuals (49 percent) report misusing prescription stimulants. Overall, young adults are most likely to abuse the prescribed stimulants Adderall (60 percent), Ritalin (20 percent) and Vyvanse (14 percent) which are prescribed for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

From the new data, it is evident that the college environment does have an effect on the misuse and abuse of prescription stimulants as 1 in 5 students (20 percent) report misusing or abusing prescription stimulants at least once in their lifetime, compared to 1 in 7 non-students (15 percent). Older students are also more prone to engage in these behaviors: the data found that among current students, sophomores, juniors, seniors and graduate students are significantly more likely to abuse prescription stimulants than college freshmen.

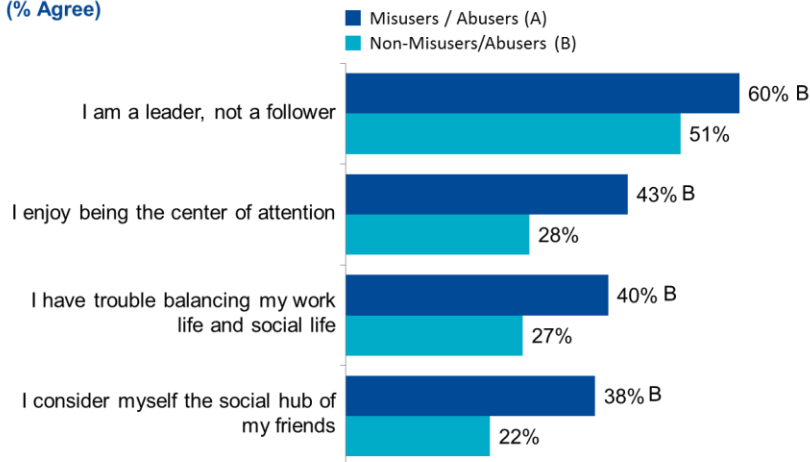
Prevalence of Rx Stimulant Misuse and Abuse Among Young Adults
 (% Have used at least once)



One of the most important findings of the research is that compared to those who do not abuse prescription stimulants, current college students and other young adults who do report abuse, tend to have more social and active lifestyles. These young adults are influencers who are at the center of their social circles and are always on the move. They are more likely to see themselves as leaders (60 percent vs. 51 percent); enjoy being the center of attention (43 percent vs. 28 percent); and consider themselves a social hub of their friends (38 percent vs. 22 percent).

Abusers of prescription stimulants also tend to struggle more often to find a balance between their social and work lives (40 percent vs. 27 percent). This trend is more prevalent when comparing students who abuse prescription stimulants (50 percent) versus those students who do not (33 percent).

Behavior and Attitudes by Rx Stimulant Misuse and Abuse
 (% Agree)



"Here are some general behaviors, attitudes and statements. For each, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with that statement."
 A-B indicates a significant difference between misusers and non-misusers at the 95% confidence level.

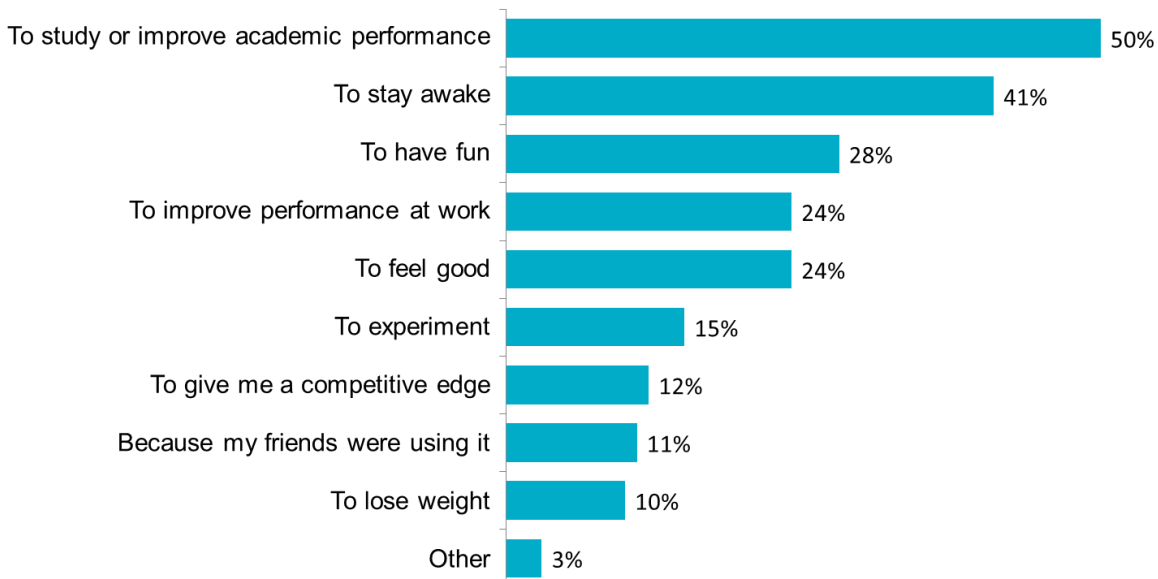
To add to this demanding lifestyle, abusers of Rx stimulants are also less likely to receive financial support from their parents compared to those who do not abuse (48 percent vs. 59 percent receive support from parents, respectively); and more than a quarter of students (27 percent) who report abuse of prescription stimulants also hold full-time jobs, in addition to attending school (compared to 12 percent of those who do not abuse prescription stimulants).

Reasons for Misusing or Abusing Rx Stimulants

Current college students and other young adults generally abuse prescription stimulants for functional reasons. Half (50 percent) report abusing to study or improve academic performance; more than 4 in 10 (41 percent) abuse to stay awake; and almost one-fourth (24 percent) abuse to improve work performance. Likewise, among college students specifically, similar reasons are given: to study and improve academic performance (44 percent); to stay awake (31 percent); and to improve work performance (21 percent).

A smaller proportion of young adults say they misuse prescription stimulants for less functional reasons, such as “to have fun” or “to feel good,” and interestingly, these individuals are more likely to be misusing their own prescribed medicines rather than someone else’s.

Top Reasons for Misusing and Abusing Rx Stimulants
(Asked among those who have misused or abused)



“Thinking about when you have used a prescription stimulant (e.g. Ritalin, Adderall, Concerta) for nonmedical use, which of the following are reasons you have used it?”

The research also shows that young adults perceive tangible rewards for abusing prescription stimulants, as 6 in 10 of those who do abuse (61 percent) indicate that doing so has helped him or her obtain a higher grade, improve work performance or gain a competitive edge; and slightly more than 6 in 10 college students (64 percent) who abuse Rx stimulants indicate the same.

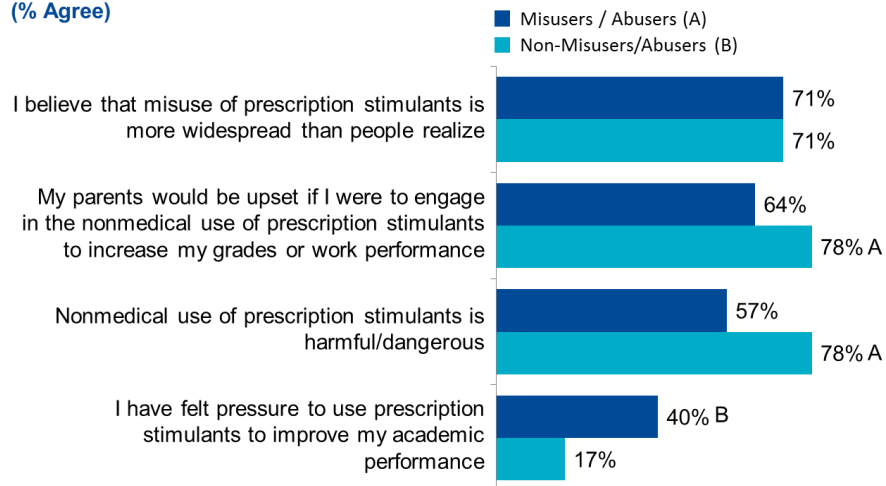
Attitudes and Risks Associated with Rx Stimulant Abuse

Overall, young adults view the abuse of prescription stimulants as less risky than the abuse of prescription pain relievers, smoking cigarettes or binge drinking. Those who do not abuse prescription stimulants are also more likely to associate risks in doing so. When compared to their counterparts who abuse prescription stimulants, this group of non-abusing young people is also more likely to believe abuse of Rx stimulants can endanger one's health (80 percent), lead to addiction (79 percent) or cause an overdose (77 percent). On the other hand, most (73 percent) of those who do abuse Rx stimulants agree that the side effect "not being able to sleep" is a risk associated with abusing prescribed stimulants.

Those who do abuse prescription stimulants are also more likely to feel pressure to abuse to improve academic performance, compared to those who do not abuse (40 percent vs. 17 percent); and this relationship is more prevalent among current college students (50 percent vs. 19 percent). They are also less likely to think that their parents would be upset if she or he were to abuse Rx stimulants to increase academic or work performance (64 percent vs. 78 percent); and this trend is similar for current college students (62 percent vs. 79 percent).

Behavior and Attitudes by Rx Stimulant Misuse and Abuse

(% Agree)



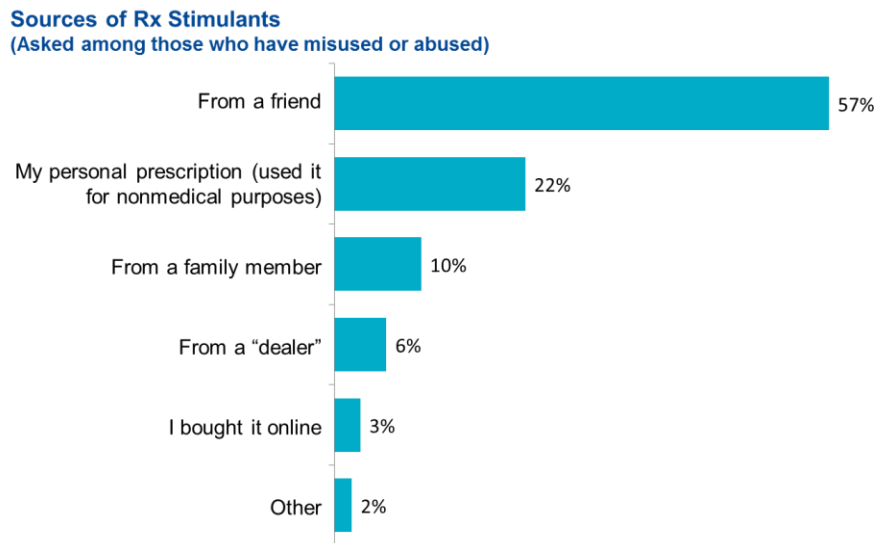
"Here are some statements about prescription stimulants. Based on what you know about prescription stimulants, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement..."

A-B indicates a significant difference between misusers and non-misusers at the 95% confidence level.

It's also plausible that those who abuse prescription stimulants are less likely to perceive risks in using other substances, compared to those who do not abuse. This is evident by the fact that Rx stimulant abusers are twice as likely to have engaged in binge drinking, twice as likely to have used marijuana, and three times as likely to have abused prescription pain relievers.

Accessibility

The accessibility and social acceptance of the behavior of Rx stimulant abuse is making it easier for young adults to misuse these medications. The research also shows that those who engage in the behavior are mostly obtaining the Rx medicine from their friends (and not from “dealers”). More than half of young adults (56 percent) indicate that it is easy to obtain Rx stimulants that were not prescribed to them and a majority of them (58 percent) say they have friends who abuse Rx stimulants. Of those who said they abuse Rx stimulants, 57 percent report that the last time they abused, they received the medication from a friend, while 10 percent report obtaining it from a family member and 6 percent from a “dealer.” In addition, almost all young adults (96 percent) who abuse Rx stimulants report that they believe their friends abuse prescription stimulants as well.



“The last time you used a prescription stimulant for nonmedical use, where did you get the prescription stimulant?”

More than a quarter of young adults (28 percent) who have been legally prescribed Rx stimulants share their medicine with friends. A large portion of these young adults (52 percent) also report being pressured by their friends into sharing or selling their Rx stimulants.

Importantly, the research shows that among those individuals who are legitimately prescribed Rx stimulants, more than 1 in 4 young adults (28 percent) report exaggerating symptoms to obtain a larger dosage of their medication from their physicians.

Implications and Resources

Clinicians and healthcare professionals who are prescribing stimulants need to be aware that a significant proportion of their young patients are “gaming” the system and exaggerating symptoms in an effort to misuse their own prescriptions, or gain access to larger doses. And once they are legitimately prescribed stimulants, these young adults often give or sell their prescriptions to others, or face pressure from their peers to “share.”

The data clearly show that young people see this behavior as a way to cope with increasingly busy lifestyles. As teens become older and more independent, they will need to develop skills to successfully manage their time and the pressures of their daily lives, without resorting to misusing or abusing prescription stimulants and other Rx medicines.

Parents, as well as educational institutions, can help students and young adults develop better time management skills so they can maintain a healthy balance between the demands of academic and work life, and their social commitments. For college students who are looking for ways to balance school, work, and social obligations, New York University offers tips on more [effective personal time management](#).

The Medicine Abuse Project is a national, action campaign that aims to prevent half a million teens from abusing medicine over five years. Parents and families can learn more about preventing prescription drug abuse and over-the-counter (OTC) cough medicine abuse by visiting the Medicine Abuse Project at <http://medicineabuseproject.org>.

There they will find tips on how to properly dispose of medicine and how to safeguard medicines at home, along with resources for parents, healthcare providers, law enforcement/communities and educators. [The Medicine Abuse Project](#) also features a comprehensive prescription drug guide to help parents learn about the prescription and over-the-counter drugs that teens are most commonly abusing, including what they look like, their street or slang names, how they're taken and what the potential side effects are.