

Among students, illicit prescription drug use rising

Study finds number of student abusers has increased over last 15 years

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After smoking marijuana everyday for seven months, a visit and citation from the campus police prompted one University student, who would only be identified by his nickname, Vern, to try something new.

He turned to prescription drugs.

Over the course of about a week, Vern - who asked to remain anonymous because of possible legal ramifications - tried Vicodin, a powerful painkiller, Xanax, an anti-depressant and Robitussin, an over-the-counter drug.

Abuse of prescription drugs has become a growing regularity among college students. A recent study conducted by University researchers found that about 20 percent of college students take prescription drugs for non-medical reasons. The number of abusers has increased among students over the last 15 years.

The study found that prescription painkillers like Vicodin and Tylenol 3 - a stronger version of Tylenol containing the opiate codeine - were among the most abused by college students.

Stimulants like Adderall and Ritalin, which students often use to stay awake longer or remain focused while studying, were also on the list. The study showed that there were more non-medical users of those two drugs than prescribed users.

"Our generation is really over-diagnosed with ADD and ADHD," Vern said.

ADD or ADHD, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, is a condition that impairs the ability to focus. Adderall and Ritalin are often prescribed for the disorder.

Robert Winfield, director of the University Health Service, said there is little UHS can do to prevent non-medical users from taking prescription drugs.

"We're very thoughtful and careful about prescribing stimulant drugs," he said. "If someone comes in and just asks for Adderall, we require some significant proof that they have ADD or ADHD."

The study's researchers suggested screening for general drug abuse among students who have been caught abusing prescription medications in the past. Winfield said UHS had considered it, but that the screenings weren't feasible.

"It's just not possible," he said. "We haven't been able to figure out a way to keep the flow of things and do that."

Sean McCabe, the lead researcher of the study, said recreational drug use isn't the only reason that students are dabbling in prescription drugs.

"Some students are turning to them for purposes of self-treatment, like somebody who is experiencing pain and who obtains prescription opioids (painkillers) to relieve the pain," McCabe said.

He said self-treatment can involve anything from numbing the pain from a temporary injury to someone who's having trouble falling asleep and wants sleeping pills.

Another student, who also asked that she not be identified for legal reasons, said she asks around to find Vicodin or Tylenol 3 about once a month to help calm her migraines. She said the medication her doctor prescribed caused discomfort and carried serious side effects, including stomach ulcers.

"I wouldn't be doing any of this for fun," she said.

She said she pays about \$10 for each pill.

While the study showed that prescription drug abusers were more likely to abuse other substances, the student said she doesn't use any other drugs and only drinks occasionally.

Winfield and McCabe both highlighted the same risks for taking prescription drugs without a prescription. They cited the risks of addiction, physical harm and making a "bad decision" under the influence of a prescriptive drug that one wouldn't otherwise make.

Students who get prescription drugs from friends or family, McCabe said, don't benefit from a clinical consultation and don't realize the risks involved.

"There is a risk in that people who are using non-medically are unaware of the medication's potential interaction with other drugs," McCabe said. "Or maybe they have a pre-existing health condition where they shouldn't take that medication."

The study also found that most medical users of prescription drugs reported no history of non-medical use, which McCabe said should reassure health professionals who provide for college students.

Rates of addiction were connected to how students took the medication, how often, and which drug they used. McCabe said. Inhaling the crushed powder of prescription drugs increases the probability of developing an addiction.

McCabe said results showed that 40 to 50 percent of people use prescription stimulants by snorting them.

Vern said he enjoyed the prescription drugs, but doesn't feel a need to continue using them.

"The whole prescription thing kinda freaks me out," he said. "It was a little too wild. At the end, you really just want to be able to smoke again."

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