

## **Adderall Abuse: A Reality Check**

Let's face it – being a student can get exhausting! It seems like there are an endless number of assignments, papers, and exams always lurking around the corner. You may also be working a job as well as trying to find the time to be with family and friends and fit in some enjoyment of what life has to offer. When you think about your busy schedule, sometimes it can seem like sleeping and eating are more of a luxury than a necessity. Thus, many students search for ways that will allow them to stay alert and focused on getting their work done.

One way students have handled feeling overwhelmed has been to consume stimulants in an attempt to boost attention and concentration during long study sessions and all-nighters. For example, you may have made a big pot of coffee or downed a 2-liter of Mountain Dew hoping that large amounts of caffeine will help you to stay awake. Others may rely on a stronger form of stimulant such as No-Doze or other caffeine pills. As it becomes more critical to study and get work done, students may turn to more extreme measures. This can be especially true for today's students who face increasing pressure to succeed in college. As a result, more and more students rely on prescription stimulant medications in an effort to cope, and friends share their prescriptions of Ritalin and Adderall with one another. Unfortunately, this dangerous practice of using stimulants without a prescription is developing into a common occurrence on many college campuses throughout the United States. A 2005 study at the University of Michigan Substance Abuse Research Center showed that 10% of college students used stimulants illegally at some point in their college years, and many get them from friends who were legally prescribed the drugs.

### **Facts About Prescription Stimulants**

Drugs like Ritalin and Adderall are commonly prescribed to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). A person with ADHD typically has symptoms of inattention, impulsive hyperactivity, or both, that interfere with important areas of life, such as peer and family relationships, and school or work. Paradoxically, stimulants help people with ADHD to decrease hyperactivity and impulsivity and to increase their attention.

As long as a fellow student has a prescription for the drug, then it must be safe to use, right? Wrong. Many people do not realize prescription stimulants have potentially harmful side effects and possible problems associated with their use. If you have ADHD and take the appropriate dosage, the medications safely heighten concentration and alertness. However, students who take the medication illegally often ingest higher doses than recommended, increasing the risk for neurological and heart-related symptoms. Furthermore, the risk of addiction increases, and some people experience cardiovascular complications, increased blood pressure, and headaches. Additional complications associated with high doses include panic episodes, aggressive behavior, and suicidal or homicidal tendencies.

Even at lower doses, students who take Adderall as a "study aid" commonly experience increased heart rate, increased thirst, nervousness, irritability, and insomnia and may experience a "crash" when they come down from the medication. Studying when sleep deprived can lead to a false sense of security that you are studying well – when in fact, you are not. Researchers have not found that taking Adderall and other prescription stimulants leads to success. For example, McCabe and colleagues conducted a research study in 2005 on the non-medical use of prescription stimulants among 10,904 U.S. college students from 119 institutions. They found that people who used these medications in the past year generally reported a lower grade point average than those who did not abuse these prescription drugs, and reported higher rates of alcohol, cocaine, ecstasy, and other substance abuse. The authors noted that this may indicate that the abuse of prescription stimulants is part of a larger cluster of problem behaviors among college students.

Another problem with using prescription drugs as a “study aid” is that students do not learn effective coping strategies for dealing with stressors, and rely on a “quick fix” rather than effective study skills. It is also illegal and subject to criminal charges, both for illicitly using and selling these Schedule III controlled substances. Despite negative consequences, many students do not worry about side effects or healthy coping or consequences with the law when they feel immediate pressure to do well. Yet the belief that Adderall and Ritalin are magical pills for academic achievement is unsubstantiated: these drugs are dangerous and potentially useless for their objective. The risks associated with using these stimulants greatly outweigh any presumed benefits.

### **Improve Your Academic Performance**

Rather than risking your health with stimulants like Adderall and Ritalin, there are plenty of resources available that will help to improve your academic performance. The Counseling Center can help you to identify the obstacles that hinder your success and to develop strategies that will help you throughout your life. See our drop-in hours or call for an appointment. The Academic Success Center is another important resource providing academic support through tutoring, strategic learning, course specific study groups, study skill workshops, and services for students with disabilities. They can be reached at 312-341-3818.