Survey of College Students and the Misuse, Abuse and Diversion of ADHD Prescription Stimulant Medications

Harris Poll conducted market research on behalf of the Coalition to Prevent ADHD Medication Misuse (CPAMM) to examine the perceptions and attitudes of college students with regard to ADHD prescription stimulant misuse, abuse and diversion. A survey was administered online within the United States between May 15 and June 11, 2014, among 2,056 US college students (full-time, 91%, part-time, 9%), defined as adults aged 18 to 24 enrolled and seeking a degree at a 4-year college or university and attending at least some in-person classes. Among that group, 164 were diagnosed with ADHD. Data are weighted where necessary by age within gender, race/ethnicity, region, and propensity to be online to bring them in line with their actual proportions in the population. For the purpose of the survey, misuse refers to any time the medicine is used in a way that is different from the doctor’s instructions and could include people who do not have a prescription for the medication but obtain it and use it, and people who have a prescription but do not use it as directed by their health care provider. The key findings of the survey follow. For more information about the Coalition, visit www.CPAMM.org.

Who is believed to be misusing ADHD prescription stimulant medications?

- The rate of nonmedical use is difficult to determine. Rates of misuse vary. According to this survey, 75% of students believe at least some of their peers have used ADHD prescription stimulants not prescribed to them.

- Members of Greek organizations (fraternities and sororities) (40%) and athletes (members of varsity, junior varsity, intramural and/or club teams) (36%) are more likely than their counterparts (23% non-Greeks and 21% non-athletes) to say they are at least somewhat likely to use ADHD prescription stimulants in a way that is different from a doctor’s instructions.

Why are students perceived to be misusing ADHD prescription stimulant medication?

- Students believe the main drivers to start misusing ADHD prescription stimulants are related to academic pressures, such as a desire to get good grades (70%) and pressure to succeed (68%).

- 43% of students believe that using ADHD prescription stimulants can help students get better grades, even if they don’t have ADHD.
• Students who misuse ADHD prescription stimulants are most commonly viewed as being stressed (58%) and poor decision-makers (56%), and about half (48%) feel these students are just doing what they have to do to keep up with the pressures of college.

How do students feel about their peers misusing ADHD prescription stimulants?
• 67% of college students have some familiarity with ADHD prescription stimulant misuse and most consider use of ADHD prescription stimulants without a prescription to be harmful (73%), unethical (75%) and a "big deal" (80%) if someone who doesn’t have ADHD uses prescription stimulants.
• At the same time, however, 42% of students incorrectly believe misusing ADHD prescription stimulants is no more harmful than an energy drink or a strong cup of coffee.
• Three in five college students (59%) view misuse to do school work as a form of cheating and a similar proportion (65%) liken academic misuse of ADHD prescription stimulants to athletes who use performance-enhancing drugs.
• Three quarters (74%) of students agree that, when college students misuse ADHD prescription stimulants, they are taking away medicine from someone who really needs it.

Where do students believe their peers are getting ADHD prescription stimulants?
• 71% of college students believe it is easy for students without a prescription to get access to ADHD prescription stimulants.
• 87% of students believe friends who have a prescription are the primary source of prescription ADHD stimulants for those who are misusing, and about one in two (48%) think an avenue to obtain them is pretending to have ADHD and getting a prescription from a health care provider.

What are key points that physicians should know about college student perceptions and beliefs?
• Among students diagnosed with ADHD who have a prescription stimulant, almost half (46%) feel at least a little pressure to share or sell their medication.1
• Of students diagnosed with ADHD, more than a quarter (27%) believe it is acceptable for students with ADHD to share their medication with a friend.

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1 *Caution: small base size (n=96); results should be interpreted as directional in nature.
Students with ADHD are almost twice as likely (45% vs. 23%) as their peers to agree that there are certain situations when it is okay to take ADHD prescription stimulants that were not prescribed for them, and only half (53%) believe misuse is harmful. In comparison, three-quarters (75%) of students without ADHD believe misuse is harmful.

What do students think about their school’s position on the misuse of ADHD prescription stimulants?

- Despite recognition of the consequences of misuse and a belief by two in five students (40%) that misuse is a problem at their school, nearly three in five students (57%) believe that the administration and the professors at their school are unaware of the misuse of ADHD prescription stimulants on campus.
- Moreover, almost three in five college students (58%) feel that their school does not make it clear that they do not approve of ADHD prescription stimulant medication misuse.