

Press Release

UC Berkeley Study Examines Scope of Prescription Stimulant Misuse on Campus

Survey of students also reveals factors associated with this high-risk behavior

Berkeley, California – October, 2013 – Researchers from the UC Berkeley School of Public Health and University Health Services announced results from a survey of 554 UC Berkeley undergraduate students. Conducted during the Spring 2013 academic term, the study aimed to better understand barriers to success in the classroom, as well as health behaviors and attitudes of college students, with a special emphasis on the growing problem of prescription stimulant misuse.

“Prescription stimulant misuse has emerged as a form of high-risk substance use engaged in more frequently by college students, as compared to their non-college attending peers. This study allowed us to identify the extent of the problem at Cal,” said Niloofar Bavarian, a Postdoctoral Fellow who co-led the study.

Students were classified as prescription stimulant misusers if they indicated one or more of the following behaviors during college: using prescription stimulants without a prescription, using prescription stimulants for nonmedical purposes (e.g., to help with studying, to stay awake, or to get high), and/or using in excess of what was prescribed. Results from the study showed:

- *The prevalence of prescription stimulant misuse was approximately 17%;
- *The frequency of misuse per term ranged from 1 to 40 or more times, with most students who misused reporting between 1 to 9 occasions of misuse per term; and,
- *Approximately 75% of prescription stimulant misusers initiated the behavior during college.

Students who misused prescription stimulants were asked specific questions about routes of ingestion, cost per pill, sources of the drug, and motives for use. Results showed:

- *Although most students (87%) ingested the drug orally, some students (24%) also reported intranasal ingestion;
- *Most students (62%) reported receiving the drug for free;
- *Friends were cited as the source of prescription stimulants by 79% of misusers; and,
- *The primary motives for misuse were academic in nature (e.g., to improve focus and concentration), although some students reported misusing to “party longer” and “experiment.”

The survey also asked students who did NOT engage in misuse to provide reasons for abstaining. Student responses had themes related to health, cheating, and legality. Sample students responses included:

- * “Because it’s illegal and unhealthy”;
- * “Unfair advantage, like steroids for athletes”; and,
- * “Frankly, I see it as cheating.”

According to Cathy Kodama, Director of Health Promotion at Cal’s University Health Services, “These data are so valuable to help us assess the impact of these drugs on the health and safety of our students. We are committed to developing educational and support strategies to be sure students are informed about the issues, resources for assistance, and alternate measures to support their academic success. We are pleased to note that the majority of students do not use these substances, and are equally committed to supporting their choices.”

What Is Associated With Misuse?

The research team also examined a number of factors associated with misuse as a means of guiding future prevention efforts. Examples of factors associated with misuse included:

- *Reporting greater levels of ADHD-like symptoms such as inattention and hyperactivity;
- *Having a diagnosis of ADHD;
- *Reporting less frequent study habits;
- *Greater positive misuse expectancies;
- *Participation in Greek Life;
- *Participation in varsity athletics;
- *Endorsement of misuse by friends; and,
- *Perceiving misuse as being prevalent amongst friends.

“Our findings have implications for prevention,” said Bavarian. “For example, at the student-level, we noticed that reporting ADHD and ADHD-like symptoms was associated with misuse. For this reason, we are collaborating with Disability Services to see how we can best serve this sub-population of students. Meetings with Social Services and Athletics have also commenced as a means of serving other higher-risk populations, such as student athletes and students participating in Greek Life.” In addition to working with these higher-risk groups, the research team is also reaching out to health care providers, with a presentation of study findings and implications scheduled for the Fall term. The research team is also currently developing web content to be added to the the University Health Services website that will: 1) Highlight the disconnect between perceived prevalence and actual prevalence of misuse, 2) Provide time management tips, 3) Share the dangers associated with mixing prescription stimulants and alcohol, and 4) Provide referral sources for students who have, or know someone who has, a problem with misuse.

About The Study Methodology

This study utilized paper-based, in classroom, surveys. A total of 554 students from 24 undergraduate classrooms participated (student response rate=91%). The survey sample was demographically representative of the total undergraduate population at Cal. Results from descriptive statistics and unadjusted logistic regression analyses are presented in this press release. Funding was provided by the Prevention Research Center and University Health Services.

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