

A Weekly FAX from the Center for Substance Abuse Research

University of Maryland, College Park

Prescription Stimulants: The “New Caffeine” for Enhancing College Students’ Academic Performance?

CESAR staff monitor a variety of indicators of drug use and abuse in Maryland. However, none of these indicators track drug trends among college students. To fill this gap, CESAR staff designed a qualitative survey that would provide information about drug trends in the local student population. A consistent panel of 26 student reporters completes a periodic Student Drug Research (SDR) survey about their perceptions and observations of drug availability, drug trends, and emerging drugs around campus. The first two surveys, conducted in March and April of 2005, focused on the misuse of prescription stimulants, which is believed to be a growing problem among college students. Following are some of the findings from these surveys, which were recently released in a July 2005 *DEWS Investigates* report.

- Adderall®, a prescription stimulant used to treat attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), was thought to be misused more often than other prescription stimulants because it was prescribed more often and was easily accessible around campus. One student reported that “everybody has a friend that is prescribed Adderall at this point.” Other reasons cited were that Adderall had a better reputation among students, caused fewer emotional ups and downs, and was believed to work better overall.
- The most common reason cited for misusing prescription stimulants was to enhance academic performance when studying and taking exams. Several reporters noted that prescription stimulant use goes up during finals. According to one student, “Almost any student I talk [to] has used or is using Adderall to help them study.” Another student noted that “many questions have been raised on whether or not it’s actually cheating and a form of academic dishonesty.”
- Using prescription stimulants to study was generally considered less harmful and more socially acceptable than using them to party or mix with alcohol or other drugs. In fact, one student referred to these drugs as the “new caffeine.”

The SDR surveys provided extensive details about the misuse of prescription stimulants by college students at one university. These findings, combined with recent national research, suggest that the misuse of prescription stimulants by college students is a topic in need of attention. Student leaders, parents, researchers, and administrators should work together to identify, understand, and discuss the health and social consequences of this misuse, including the occasional use of these drugs to enhance academic performance. Reprints of the *DEWS Investigates* report, “New Student Drug Research (SDR) Survey Examines Prescription Stimulant Misuse Among College Students,” are available by contacting CESAR at cesar@cesar.umd.edu. The report may also be downloaded from our website (<http://www.cesar.umd.edu>).

NOTE: Student reporters perceptions of drug use are not representative of the general student population. The SDR findings are obtained from a panel of students oversampled to include students familiar with drug use.

SOURCE: Maryland Drug Early Warning System (DEWS), Center for Substance Abuse Research (CESAR), “New Student Drug Research (SDR) Survey Examines Prescription Stimulant Misuse Among College Students,” *DEWS Investigates*, July 2005. For more information, contact Dr. Eric Wish at ewish@cesar.umd.edu.

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