

Incidence and persistence of nonmedical use of prescription analgesics among college students

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Aim: Recent studies have documented the extent of nonmedical use of prescription analgesics (NPA) by college students, but no investigations have examined how this behavior changes over time. Using three years of prospective data from the College Life Study, we: 1) Describe the patterns of change in NPA with respect to incidence, persistence, and cessation of use; and 2) Examine the patterns of change in frequency of NPA.

Methods: At study outset, participants were 1,253 freshman students ages 17 to 19 attending a large public university in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. In annual personal interviews, participants were assessed for NPA; 85% participated in all three annual assessments.

Results: Among 158 lifetime NPA cases at baseline, 29% persistently continued NPA all three years; 59% ceased NPA by year three; the remaining 12% used intermittently. Among the 45 persistent users, 56% increased their frequency of use over time, with average frequency of use increasing from 8.7 ($SD=9.6$) days in their lifetime at baseline, to 23.2 ($SD=76.1$) days in the past year by year three. Interestingly, the increase in frequency of NPA use was more dramatic from baseline to year two than from year two to three. Among 895 individuals who had never used analgesics nonmedically at baseline, "new" or incident NPA was observed in 9% by year two and 13% by year three. The risk for incident NPA was similar across race, gender, and sorority/fraternity affiliation, but was significantly higher for students living off campus ($\chi^2(df)=14.1(1)$, $p<.0001$).

Conclusions: Prescription analgesics have substantial abuse potential for college students. For many students, NPA is a persistent behavior, rather than an isolated episode of experimentation. Implications for prevention and early intervention are discussed.

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