Many Young People Misuse Psychoactive Drugs They're Prescribed

Nearly a third of teens and young adults improperly use tranquilizers, stimulants and other psychoactive drugs.

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New findings published in the journal Family Medicine & Community Health reveal that nearly a third of teens and young adults misuse prescribed psychoactive drugs such as tranquilizers and stimulants, reports BMJ.

Psychoactive drugs alter brain function and can cause changes in a person's mood, awareness, thoughts and behavior. Doctors prescribe them to treat pain and mental health disorders, including depression, anxiety and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder.

For their investigation, researchers looked at the responses of more than 110,000 young people in the United States between ages 12 and 25 who participated in the National Survey of Drug Use and Health Sampling.

Survey results showed that 35% of respondents took a prescribed psychoactive drug in the last year, and 30% admitted to misusing that medication. Despite opioids being the drug most often prescribed, teens and young adults were more likely to misuse stimulants and tranquilizers (45%).

One in 10 respondents reported using at least two psychoactive drugs, with nearly six in 10 (58%) confirming misuse of at least one of those medications. An estimated 87% also admitted to misusing other substances, such as alcohol, marijuana, cocaine and hallucinogens.

Researchers also found that misuse was likely to increase with age. One in four adolescents ages 12 to 17 said they took a psychoactive drug they were prescribed during the past year; 6% of these took two of these meds. Among individuals ages 18 to 25, 41% took a psychoactive medication, and 13.5% took two such meds.

Teens were more likely to use opioids (19%), followed by stimulants (7%), tranquilizers (4%) and sedatives (2%). However, 40% admitted to misusing tranquilizers, 24% stimulants, 18% opioids and 14% sedatives.

About 35% of 18- to 25-year-olds reported misusing at least one drug. Among those who were

prescribed a minimum of two psychoactive medications, 61% admitted to drug misuse, and nearly 94% reported using another substance at the same time.

Despite opioids being the most commonly prescribed drug, those in this age group most often misused tranquilizers (45%), followed by stimulants (51%), opioids (23%) and sedatives (19%).

In addition, researchers observed that 11.5% of these young adults disclosed experiencing severe psychological distress. (Scientists found that misuse of every psychoactive prescription drug evaluated frequently coincided with such occurrences.)

“It is important to monitor the diversity of medication misuse behaviors among youth and young adults, given their potential for abuse liability,” study authors concluded.

For related coverage, read “Teens Opioid ODs Tied to Mental Health, Substance Abuse Disorders” and “COVID-19 Could Lead to a Surge in Overdose Deaths.”

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