Student Health: Alcohol and Drugs

College-aged youths are abusing a number of prescription medications, over-the-counter drugs and illegal drugs, including Adderall, alcohol, cold medicine, OxyContin and medical marijuana.

Substance abuse among young adults is hardly new, but behavior experts believe the progression of prescription drug overdoses, in addition to a spike in binge drinking, borders on alarming for today’s college-age students. Among adults ages 18-25, abuse of prescription drugs is second only to abuse of marijuana, according to the 2010 National Survey on Drug Use and Health.

Hundreds of thousands more of today’s college students are abusing prescription drugs than was the case in the early 1990s, and the number of students using marijuana daily has more than doubled to approximately 4 percent.

According to a Columbia University study, almost half of full-time college students binge drink or abuse prescription drugs, and almost a quarter of those college students meet the medical definition of having a problem with substance abuse or a dependence. That is three times the rate of the general population.

Substance abuse is defined as a pattern of drug use leading to significant problems or distress, while substance dependence is defined as continued use of drugs or alcohol, even when significant problems related to use have developed.

Student Health Infographic

Learn more about common threats to student health.

1. **Adderall:**

Adderall is known as “the study drug” on college campuses, but that’s not why it is prescribed or why it was developed. It is a prescription drug for treating attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). It is widely abused, however, by students without an ADHD diagnosis. In fact, one in five college students admits to using Adderall (amphetamine and dextroamphetamine) without an ADHD diagnosis, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

**Why Students like Adderall**:

Students without ADHD who take Adderall report a heightened sense of motivation, focus and concentration, which can help when pulling an all-nighter and provide an added boost before an exam. Adderall does not make a student smarter; it simply helps eliminate distractions and allows students to stay focused.

ADHD is a neurobehavioral-based disorder characterized by difficulties in focusing, reasoning, problem solving and planning. It is linked to a lack of dopamine in the brain. Adderall is attractive even to students without ADHD because they believe it can help them perform better academically. Some students abuse the drug simply for the high it gives them.

Students looking for Adderall may obtain the drug from friends who have been diagnosed with ADHD or may get a prescription from a doctor. Students report that it is easy to copy the symptoms of ADHD in front of a doctor, and some say doctors hand out Adderall if students express any anxiety over their ability to focus in school.

**Risks of Adderall:**

Adderall abuse is considered a serious problem among college students. According to the 2010 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, more than 11 percent of people ages 12 to 25 reported using prescription drugs for non-medical reasons within the past year, and full-time college students ages 18 to 22 were twice as likely to abuse Adderall as those of the same age not in college.

When students take Adderall without a medical reason, they can easily become addicted to and dependent on the drug.

| They are also at a higher risk for harmful side effects such as: | |
| --- | --- |
| Low blood pressure | Depression |
| Headaches | Irritability |
| Dry mouth | Rapid mood swings |
| Loss of appetite | Insomnia |

Students who experience these symptoms should stop taking the drug and seek help right away.

**Alcohol on College Campuses**

Alcohol abuse has long been a serious concern on college campuses. Four out of five college students drink at least occasionally during their college career, according to a 2009 survey by the National Institutes of Health, and 40 percent of college student drinkers admitted to binge drinking at least once within two weeks of taking the survey.

Binge drinking – drinking heavily over a short period of time with the sole intention of becoming intoxicated – is defined as consuming five or more standard drinks in a row for men and four or more for women. According to the 2001 National Household Drug Abuse Survey, people ages 18 to 25 have the highest prevalence of binge drinking, with a peak rate occurring at age 21.

Although alcohol is not always involved in hazing, it is often a contributing factor. Hazing is defined by the National Collaborative for Hazing Research and Prevention Center as “any activity expected of someone joining or participating in a group that humiliates, degrades, abuses or endangers them regardless of a person’s willingness to participate.”

Alcohol also creates problems when it is consumed in combination with energy drinks. Mixing energy drinks with alcohol in a social setting has become popular on college campuses nationwide; it can have harmful and sometimes fatal consequences.

**Why people drink Alcohol:**

Alcohol, a forbidden fruit for students younger than 21, is often seen as a way to fit in on campus. It helps to erase inhibitions and is seen as a way to get rid of the stress of class and exams. The college party scene can be attractive – and always comes with large amounts of alcohol.

In addition, people abuse alcohol to numb the pain of failed relationships or to cope with any number of conditions, including depression. People drink because it was a learned behavior, because it is social and socially accepted and/or as a way to escape life’s anxieties.

**Risks of Alcohol**

Excessive drinking can lead to something as minor as a hangover or it can lead to death. According to NIH, about 25 percent of college students report academic consequences of their drinking, including missing class, falling behind, doing poorly on exams or papers and receiving lower grades.

The NIH also reports that  1,825 college students between the ages of 18 and 24 die each year from alcohol-related injuries. Drinking excessive amounts of alcohol can also lead to other serious side effects.

| The more a student drinks, the more likely he or she will experience negative consequences, including: | |
| --- | --- |
| **Unprotected Sex** | As a result of one night of excessive drinking, approximately 13 percent of college students reported having unprotected sex. |
| **Driving Under the Influence** | Each year, more than 3.3 million students ages 18-24 drive under the influence of alcohol. |
| **Assault** | Every year, 690,000 students ages 18 to 24 are assaulted by another student who is under the influence of alcohol. |
| **Sexual Abuse** | Each year, 97,000 college students are victims of alcohol-related date rape or sexual abuse. |
| **Injuries** | Approximately 599,000 college students sustain alcohol-related injuries each year. |

*Source: NIH*

**Alcohol and Hazing:**

The misuse of alcohol plays a role in the rapidly increasing rate of hazing on college campuses. Hazing occurs in, but extends beyond, varsity athletics and Greek-letter organizations and includes behaviors that are abusive, dangerous and often illegal.

According to the National Study of Student Hazing, more than half of college students who participate in clubs, teams or organizations are victims of hazing. Although hazing has been around for years, studies are just recently documenting the effects and severity of it.

In May 2012, 13 people were charged with the suspected hazing death of a Florida A&M University college band member, Robert Champion. Those charges were later elevated to felony manslaughter.

On Nov. 2, 2012, David Bogenberger, a Northern Illinois University freshman, was found dead at the Pi Kappa Alpha fraternity house near the campus. Officials said the cause of Bogenberger’s death was hazing-related and attributed it to cardiac arrhythmia, with alcohol intoxication as a significant contributor to death.

**Mixing Alcohol with Energy Drinks:**

Energy drinks are designed to give the consumer a jolt of energy from the combination of stimulants and “energy boosters,” including caffeine, B vitamins, herbal extracts, amino acids and sugar derivatives.

Although college students typically consume one energy drink to give them the boost of energy they need to get through the day, when they find themselves at a social setting like a party, students may consume up to three energy drinks, combined with alcohol. Mixing energy drinks with alcohol is far more dangerous than drinking either by itself.

Caffeine in energy drink acts as a stimulant and boosts the heart rate, while the alcohol acts as a depressant and slows the heart. The combination sends mixed signals to the body, which can lead to  heart-related problems, speech and walking difficulties, confusion and exhaustion. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has reported 13 deaths linked to energy drinks.

**Students with Cold Medicine:**

Over-the-counter drugs, including cold medicines, are becoming the nation’s fastest growing drug problem among college and high school students. According to the 2006 National Survey on Drug and Health, about 3.1 million people ages 12 to 25 reported using an OTC cough and cold medication to get high, and nearly 1 million had done so in the past year (474,000 youth and 514,000 young adults).

The OTC drugs of choice among young adults are cough and cold medicines containing dextromethorphan (DXM), including Triaminic DM, Coricidin, Tylenol Cold, Robitussin DM, DayQuil and NyQuil products and many others.  Products that contain DXM are often available only behind the pharmacy counter; some states require users to be at least 18.

**Appeal with Cold Medicine:**

Young adults choose cold medications to get high because they don’t need a prescription to obtain the medicine, it is inexpensive and it is an easy way to get high. A student who wants to get high from cough or cold medicine will typically drink an entire eight-ounce bottle or take a package of the medicine in pill form. The medication generates the hallucinations and dissociative, out-of-body experiences.

**Risks of Cold Medicine:**

Although OTC drugs are considered safe enough to be sold over the counter, hospital emergency department data show that every year, more than 12,000 people are treated for overdose of non‐prescription medicines – specifically cough syrups.

OTC drugs can also act as gateway drugs to other drug use. According to the 2006 National Survey on Drug and Health, about 81.9 percent of students ages 12 to 25 who have misused an OTC cough and cold medicine at least once are also regular marijuana users, and about 44 percent are lifetime users of hallucinogens or ecstasy.

Students who abuse cold medicine can become addicted, which is defined as consuming 100 mg to 600 mg of liquid medicine at least once a week.

| Addiction increases the likelihood of severe side effects, including: | |
| --- | --- |
| Death | Brain damage |
| Seizures | Blurry vision |
| Dizziness | Numbness in toes and fingers |
| Paranoia | Impaired Judgment |
| Slurred speech |  |

If students experience these symptoms, they should seek medical help immediately.

**Students with OsyContin:**

OxyContin is a narcotic pain reliever that was introduced in 1995. It is now a widely abused drug among college students nationwide. In fact, it’s considered the most abused prescription drug in the United States, and each year the number of students overdosing on the drug rises.

**Appeal of OxyContin:**

Students turn to OxyContin (oxycodone) because of the high they get and the perception that it’s safer than illegal drugs. One post on Urban Dictionary says users will feel “loose and free kinda like being drunk but you won’t get sick and you don’t feel bad in the morning. You can also party like a rockstar all night long without getting tired.”

According to the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, college students reported that it is easier for them to obtain a pack of addictive painkillers like OxyContin than it is to get their hands on a six-pack of beer. Since the drug is legal, easily attainable and cheap, college students are increasingly taking the drug and becoming addicted.

**Risks of OxyContin:**

In 2006, the Monitoring the Future Study conducted by the University of Michigan found that at least 3 percent of full-time college students in the United States take OxyContin without a prescription in a given year.

Students often do not realize the detrimental effects OxyContin can have, or how quickly they can become addicted. OxyContin can damage the brain and impair judgment. Misuse of Oxycontin also increases the risk of personal injury and accidents, and can lead to risky sexual behavior, misuse of other drugs and even death.

Prescription drug overdose deaths increased for the 11th consecutive year in 2010. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that there were 38,329 drug overdose deaths in the United States that year, and three out of four of the medication overdose deaths were caused by addictive pain killers, including OxyContin.

**Students and Medical Marijuana**

With 18 states plus Washington, D.C., having legalized marijuana for medicinal purposes, the abuse of marijuana is an increasing concern on and around college campuses. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, as of 2012, just over 1 million Americans are medical marijuana patients. However, it is difficult to track the levels of medical marijuana abuse.

**Appeal of Medical Marijuana:**

Medical marijuana is the same marijuana that is smoked recreationally, and the appeal is largely the same: It can improve mood and relieve pain. It is typically prescribed for patients with cancer, AIDS, ADHD, Crohn’s disease, neurogenic pain, migraines, arthritis or multiple sclerosis.

For nonsmokers, medical marijuana is sold in baked good including cookies, chocolate rolls, candies and beverages. Some question

Although medical marijuana has a number of medical benefits, it is increasingly being abused by college students. There is some concern that physicians may overprescribe marijuana for a broad range of medical conditions. Some students find it easy to obtain a prescription for slight night blindness or other minor complications.

College students who have a prescription for marijuana are prone to share their prescription with friends or family.

| Medical Marijuana Availability: | | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Alaska | Arizona | California |
| Colorado | Connecticut | Delaware |
| Hawaii | Maine | Massachusetts |
| Michigan | Montana | Nevada |
| New Jersey | New Mexico | Oregon |
| Rhode Island | Vermont | Washington |
| Washington D.C. |  |  |

**Risks of Marijuana**

| Frequent marijuana use may have negative physical and emotional effects, including : |
| --- |
| Distorted perception |
| Rapid heart beat |
| Loss of balance and coordination |
| Difficulty thinking or problem-solving |
| Decreased reaction time |
| Impairments in short-term memory, learning, listening, judgment and perception |
| Anxiety |
| Paranoia |

About 9 out of 10 students who use marijuana participate in other high-risk activities such as heavy drinking or cigarette smoking, according to a study by the Harvard School of Public Health. Marijuana use is also associated with poor academic performance, isolation, participation in criminal acts and a weakened immune system, which can lead to a number of health problems.

**Help for Students with a Drug or Alcohol Problem**

Some signs of a drug addiction or that someone needs help may include rapid mood swings, change in sleeping habits, behavioral changes such as stealing, lying or isolation from friends, and noticeable weight loss.

There are many treatment options for students suffering from addiction, including detox coupled with complementary treatment such as yoga, massage therapy or meditation, medication, support groups and 12-step programs. The first step is recognizing when there is a problem and then taking the actions necessary for recovery (call the Baylor Counseling Center today)

(Drugwatch.com/students)