

# DEWS INVESTIGATES

## Perceptions of Prescription Stimulant Misuse among College Students at High and Low Risk of Drug Use

October 2006

### The Student Drug Research (SDR) Survey

In March 2005, DEWS launched the Student Drug Research (SDR) survey to monitor drug trends among college students in College Park, Maryland. A panel of 26 undergraduate student reporters (SRs) was recruited from the University of Maryland at College Park to participate in periodic surveys about their perceptions of drug availability, drug trends, and emerging drugs around campus. To ensure that the panel of students was knowledgeable about campus drug trends, we initially recruited students who had reported drug use or knowledge in a prior survey. These SRs constitute our High Risk sample.

The July 2005 *DEWS Investigates* presented results from the March and April 2005 surveys of High Risk SRs, showing that non-medical use of prescription stimulants was perceived to be widespread on campus, especially for enhancing performance on exams and studying. To determine whether lower risk students have similar perceptions of stimulant use on cam-

pus, we recruited a new sample of 22 Low Risk SRs to participate in the surveys. Low Risk students had reported limited or no drug use in the prior survey from which the high risk sample was also drawn.

In Fall 2005, confidential questionnaires were completed by 22 High Risk SRs and 17 Low Risk SRs and in Spring 2006, by 12 High Risk SRs and 13 Low Risk SRs. SRs were given \$20 for each completed questionnaire. This report uses the results from these surveys to compare the perceptions of the High and Low Risk SRs on the non-medical use of prescription stimulants on campus.

### Findings

#### Do High and Low Risk SRs share comparable views on how easy it is to obtain drugs around campus?

As shown in Table 1, the perceived availability of specific drugs on campus was similar for the High and Low Risk SRs, with two excep-

tions. Low Risk SRs were more likely to say that steroids and Oxycontin were easy to obtain. In fact, one half of the High Risk SRs indicated they did not even know about the availability of either of these two drugs.

In contrast, nearly all of the High and Low Risk SRs reported alcohol and marijuana to be easily available on campus. After alcohol and marijuana, the prescription stimulants Adderall® and Ritalin® were the only other drugs thought to be easily available for misuse by the large majority of both High and Low Risk SRs. Another prescription stimulant, Concerta®, was much less likely to be perceived to be available, and the majority of the High and Low Risk SRs reported they did not know about its availability on campus.

Several SRs explained why they thought Concerta was less likely to be misused. One Low Risk SR reported that, compared to Concerta, "I think Adderall and Ritalin are easier to obtain because more students have access or a prescription. It seems to be a

### HIGHLIGHTS

The Student Drug Research (SDR) survey asks a panel of college students for their perceptions of drug use on campus. Results from the Spring 2005 survey showed that the Student Reporters (SRs) perceived non-medical use of prescription stimulants to be widespread. However, that study was based solely on a sample of 26 SRs selected because they were at High Risk for exposure to drug use. To address whether lower risk students have similar perceptions of campus drug trends, we recruited a sample of 22 Low Risk students to also participate in the SDR surveys in the Fall 2005 and Spring 2006.

**Key Issues:** Do the High and Low Risk samples have similar views on ease of obtaining specific drugs, patterns of non-medical prescription stimulant use, and why people choose to use prescription stimulants non-medically instead of other stimulants.

#### Key Findings:

- After alcohol and marijuana, both High and Low Risk SRs perceived the prescription stimulants Adderall® and Ritalin® to be the most easily available drugs misused on campus.
- Both High and Low Risk SRs reported non-medical use of prescription stimulants, except Concerta®, was common among students.
- Both High and Low Risk SRs indicated that non-medical prescription stimulants were used instead of other stimulants like coffee or energy drinks because they are safe, stronger, longer lasting, and more effective.

**Conclusion:** These results suggest to us that the perceptions of widespread availability and use of prescription drugs on campus found in our earlier surveys of High Risk SRs (July 2005 *DEWS Investigates*)<sup>1</sup> are probably applicable to a wider student population. These SRs have painted a consistent picture of the misuse of prescription stimulants by students wishing to enhance their academic performance. A subset of students also use these drugs to enhance their experience of other psychoactive drugs.

*DEWS Investigates* provides a succinct report of the findings and implications of studies on important substance abuse-related issues in Maryland. Online copies are available at <http://www.cesar.umd.edu>. For more information, please contact Erin Artigiani at [erin@cesar.umd.edu](mailto:erin@cesar.umd.edu) or 301-405-9794.

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more common drug. Additionally, because it seems common more students are likely to trust its effects and not worry about side effects." A High Risk SR suggested Adderall and Ritalin may be favored over Concerta for reasons beyond availability and familiarity: "Concerta is easily obtained, but Adderall and Ritalin are obtained more easily. Also, Concerta is often more expensive because it's found in bigger doses, and often the smaller doses of Adderall and Ritalin are more effective than the larger doses of Concerta."

### Do the High and Low Risk SRs share comparable views on the patterns of prescription stimulant misuse?

Both High and Low Risk SRs reported that the use of prescription stimulants non-medically is very common on campus and that the drugs can be obtained fairly inexpensively from other students who are prescribed the drugs. For example, one Low Risk SR reported, "Prescription stimulants use has gone up—people are using it for studying more. You can get them from people with prescriptions for \$3 a 10mg [pill]." A High Risk SR provided a similar report, emphasizing most use is for studying: "Adderall® goes up around mid-term and final exam time. The party people will snort it on Friday or Saturday night, but they usually don't take it to study. Most people use it 2 to 3 times a semester and pay \$10 for three 10mg [pills] and get it from friends of friends [who are] prescribed it. 95% of it is used for studying and 5% [is] used for partying."

Both High and Low Risk SRs also reported that there are different patterns of non-medical prescription drug use, based on whether school is in session. A High Risk SR stated that, "The only major differences [in drug use between the Spring semester and the summer] were less use of Adderall and other stimulants for study purposes because not as many people were taking classes. Alcohol and marijuana use did go up though because there were no classes and people could party whenever they wanted to. I know a couple of people who used one or the other almost every day."

A Low Risk SR suggested prescription stimulants are used for a different purpose in the

summer: "Yes, people use prescription stimulants much more frequently [during the school year] and for different reasons. During the school year, kids take them to study/get work done—things they don't usually need to do during the summer. If people take them during the summer it's usually to stay awake & [sic] party all night. People still use them that way during the school year, but not as much for that reason."

Another Low Risk SR suggested that not only does the reason for use change, but the method of ingestion also changes: "People are more likely to blow [snort] prescription stimulants than ingest [swallow] them during the summer because they only need them to stay awake while partying. During the school year people are more likely to ingest the drugs [swallow the drugs in pill form] while studying because they last longer that way, and the effect is more mild."

### Why do students use prescription stimulants non-medically instead of other stimulants, such as coffee or energy drinks like Red Bull?

Once again, both the High and Low Risk SRs had similar perceptions as to why students use prescription stimulants non-medically instead of other types of stimulants. Some Low Risk SRs reported: "The perception that drugs [prescription stimulants] will have a stronger longer lasting effect. It's a guaranteed fix," and that "They are more effective, last longer, [and have] less calories." Similarly, a High Risk SR indicated that, "They feel safer because they are prescriptions, so if they're okay for some it can't be dangerous to others. Also, prescription stimulants last longer and have a stronger effect." Another High Risk SR reported: "If you have ever tried them, then you would know. They work a lot better than coffee and Red Bull® because they don't make you jittery. They allow you to "lock" in to your work and really help you to focus... Adderall makes you almost excited to study. It gives you focus whereas coffee/Red Bull just wake you up."

### Conclusions

High and Low Risk SR perceptions of non-medical use of prescription stimulants on

Table 1. Percentage of SRs Indicating Drug to be Very Easy or Easy to Obtain, by Sample, Fall 2005

Drug	High Risk (n = 22) %	Low Risk (n = 16)* %
Alcohol	100%	100%
Marijuana	96	94
Adderall®	91	87
Ritalin®	73	69
Percocet®	50	56
Powder Cocaine	50	38
Vicodin®	46	63
Psychedelic Mushrooms	46	44
Xanax®	46	31
Concerta®	36	38
Steroids	32	56
Oxycontin	18	50

\*Data on drug availability were missing for one Low Risk respondent.

campus were very similar. These results suggest to us that the perceptions of widespread availability and use of prescription drugs on campus found in our earlier surveys of High Risk SRs (July 2005 *DEWS Investigates*) are probably applicable to a wider student population. However, these findings reflect the views of a small group of college students and still may not reflect the perceptions of the general student population. Nevertheless, these SRs have painted a consistent picture of the misuse of prescription stimulants by students wishing to enhance their academic performance. A subset of students also use these drugs to enhance their experience of other psychoactive drugs.

#### DEWS SDR Ending: Pubs Available on CESAR Web Site

DEWS was launched in 1998 at the State's request to provide advance warning of emerging drug problems. The Student Drug Research (SDR) survey was initiated as a part of DEWS in 2005 to collect information from college students. Funding for DEWS and SDR ended June 30, 2006. This will be our final SDR report. All SDR reports and other DEWS reports are available online at [www.cesar.umd.edu](http://www.cesar.umd.edu).

#### References

1. Drug Early Warning System. (July 2005). New Student Drug Research (SDR) Survey Examines Prescription Stimulant Misuse among College Students. College Park: University of Maryland, Center for Substance Abuse Research. Editor.