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More Than Just a Higher Grade

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MORE THAN JUST A HIGHER GRADE

LOOKING AT THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF ADHD MEDICATION
Read it for yourself: “Misuse or abuse of amphetamine may result in serious (possibly fatal) heart and blood pressure problems. Amphetamine-type medications can be habit-forming. Use only as directed. With prolonged use, drug dependence and withdrawal symptoms may occur after stopping the drug. Consult your doctor or pharmacist for more details.”

These are the exact words printed on the warning label on every package of Adderall. They emphasize the fact that Adderall and other stimulant drugs must be taken as directed, by prescription only, with a high potential for addiction.

Stimulant drugs, such as Adderall and Ritalin, are prescribed for those suffering from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or ADHD to help keep them focused. These drugs are completely safe for those with ADHD, but potentially life threatening for those who don’t suffer from the disorder — putting stimulant abusers through much more than an intense study session.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, more than 5 million children in the United States suffer from this disease and most are being treated with drugs. There are currently several ways to treat ADHD. The most commonly used are medical or behavioral treatment, a combination of both or routine community care. Medication management has been determined to be the most effective route, although there has been an epidemic of abuse with these drugs, especially on college campuses.

Children with ADHD are usually given one of three types of medication: amphetamines, methylphenidates or dexmethylphenidates, which have the ability to calm and focus people with attention disorders, but are relative to the street drug, “speed,” for those without the disorder. A fourth type, pemoline, commonly known as Cylert, is not usually prescribed due to serious side effects on the liver. Other than Cylert, none of the stimulant drugs have been found unsafe, and thus are widely prescribed to those with ADHD.

Adults and children who are affected by ADHD run virtually no risk to addiction and abuse of the stimulants, but those who do not suffer the disorder can become addicted.

In fact, the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University has found that abuse of stimulant drugs is increasing — the number of teens abusing Ritalin and Adderall has tripled in the past decade. The study shows that high school and college students are most at risk, with 10 percent abusing Ritalin and other prescription drugs — making prescriptions the second most abused drug by teens, following marijuana, which has actually been considered as an alternate treatment for ADHD.

Just how bad is marijuana for this age group? Not so bad for those with ADHD according to the American College of Physicians. The group has issued a paper lobbying for a change of classification for pot, claiming it is better to treat ADHD with a “natural, calming substance” rather than Ritalin, which has “a bunch of creepy side effects.”

However, marijuana as a treatment for ADHD is on the opposite end of the treatment spectrum than stimulant drugs.

“This is exactly the opposite of what we’re doing at this point,” said Marc Shulman, staff physician at Thielen Student Health Center. “Marijuana is a depressant, which is not necessarily a good way to treat ADHD.”

Stimulants commonly prescribed for ADHD generally have mild side effects for the person with ADHD; however, those illegally taking the drugs can suffer
'WE TAKE THE [POSSIBLE] SIDE EFFECTS OF DEATH SERIOUSLY
WE CLOSELY FOLLOW THE AMOUNT OF THOSE DRUGS COMING FROM OUR PHARMACY'
serious consequences. A report from the Brookhaven National Laboratory states that Ritalin is perfectly safe for those who have prescriptions because they are given a dosage specific to their condition. Those who abuse the drug don't suffer from ADHD so there is nothing for the drug to treat.

Shulman adds that when ADHD patients are given a prescription, they are educated about the proper ways to use the drug, and those who obtain it illegally aren't educated and often take the drug incorrectly.

"Kids are getting these drugs illegally and don't realize how they work," Shulman said. "They will take the pill then go out drinking — that's taking a stimulant and depressant at the same time — and it's putting their health at risk."

Stimulant abusers are sacrificing their health in several different ways. Chris Woolston of Consumer Health Interactive said "Abusers of Ritalin have been known to suffer severe psychiatric complications, including psychotic episodes, hallucinations, paranoia and bizarre behavior."

While Ritalin addiction isn't as serious as cocaine addiction, anyone who becomes hooked will likely suffer withdrawal symptoms. Students who use the drug even three weeks a year to help them study for exams are susceptible to addiction, and ultimately, withdrawal. Not only will they suffer from extreme fatigue, weakness and depression, but they will also be subject to tremors, heart palpitations, agitation and hypertension, according to the Drug Enforcement Administration. Talk about "dying for an 'A'."
A college campus is an easy place for students to get their hands on illegal ADHD medications. If a classroom of 24 students has at least one person with ADHD, imagine how many people in a lecture of 200 have a prescription to Ritalin or Adderall. Most times, abusers are willing to drop a pretty penny on just one pill, tempting those with the prescriptions to set up a study-buddy business.

A junior in industrial technology confesses to selling Adderall to friends for $20 a pill. Students admit to paying anywhere from $10 to $50 for one night of intense concentration.

Although many students on campus have prescriptions to the drugs, it is difficult for anyone to get them without having the disorder. Students who receive their prescriptions through the pharmacy at Thielen must have psychological conferences and meetings with physicians at least once a month in order to refill their prescription. The ADHD stimulant drugs are highly regulated by the government, rated as "schedule II" drugs that aren't allowed more than one refill at a time — which means a new, hand-written prescription is required each time the patient fills the drugs.

"We take [possible] side effects of death seriously—we closely follow the amount of those drugs coming from our pharmacy," Shulman said.

According to Shulman, it is a long, extensive workup to diagnose someone with ADHD. Patients are put through a series of concentration and memory tests, as well as psychological conferences and observations before a diagnosis or prescription to stimulants can be made.

Sarah Hunt, junior in human development and family studies, was diagnosed with ADHD in elementary school, and remembers taking several tests before her diagnosis.

"There was one where I had to click a mouse every time a dot came up on a computer screen for thirty minutes," she said. "I got distracted and it gave me a headache."

Fortunately for people with ADHD, there is a new treatment available that shows no risk of abuse: Strattera. Strattera is an ADHD drug that works differently from the amphetamines and is a non-stimulating drug. This drug is widely prescribed to adults suffering from ADHD, but is also safe for children and teens. Since Strattera is not a stimulant, ADHD drug abusers would not find the same high as they would with Ritalin, and would therefore not become addicted.

ADHD is a common disorder that can be controlled by stimulant medications. Amphetamines such as Adderall and Ritalin can dramatically increase an ADHD patient's ability to focus and remain calm. However, these drugs pose a threat to the vast majority of abusers that lurk on college campuses. Addiction and withdrawal to ADHD medications are common among students who wish to study all night and improve their grades, but that one little pill can do much more than bring up an exam grade.