

Psychotropic Medication Use in American Youth on the Rise

During the 1990s the use of psychotropic medications in youth nearly reached that of adults. Perhaps not surprising, however, according to a recent study “Psychotropic Practice Patterns for Youth,” published in January’s issue of the *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine*, the prevalence of psychotropic medication use increased 200 to 300% since 1987. An analysis of data records from approximately 900,000 youth, aged 20 years or younger, shed some light on their overall use of psychotropic medication. The study confirms what many have suspected for years; the use of psychotropic medication in children and adolescents is clearly on the rise.

The study analyzed 10 one-year cross-sectional data sets from 1987-1996 from two existing sources: a Medicaid data set from two states; and prescription dispensing records from a group-model health maintenance organization (HMO). In general, the prevalence of all classes of medications grew proportionally as a function of the child’s age. The use of stimulants and antidepressants were ranked as the first and second most utilized classes, respectively. Large increases in the use of stimulants to treat females, and similar increases in the use of antidepressants to treat males, were observed during the 10 year study

period. Methylphenidate accounted for 77-87% of all stimulant use. Antidepressants were the second most commonly prescribed medication by 1996 and amphetamines use experienced a 7-14 fold increase. The use of “mood stabilizer” anti-convulsants used to treat mania, conduct disorders, and control acting out behaviors also increased considerably over the decade.



Several research limitations were cited including issues of generalizability (data is not a representative sample of all US youth), these findings may be dated (data is more than 5 years old), diagnostic information is absent, and utilization data does not necessarily indicate consumption.

Although not a perfect picture of the overall trend in psychotropic drug use in youth, the study does depict a rise in the use of these

medications despite insufficient research on its effectiveness. Researchers and professionals need to continue to examine the efficacy, effectiveness, safety, and long-term implications of psychopharmacological approaches to treating children and adolescents with mental health needs.

While there have been multiple studies advocating the use of psychopharmacological approaches, including the use of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, such as clomipramine, fluvoxamine, citalopram, fluoxetine, and opioid antagonists, such as naltrexone, as treatment for adult gambling disorders; none of these approaches have yet been utilized with adolescents. Considerable more research is needed to determine what role these drugs may play in helping young problem gamblers. The future use of psychotropic medications in treating gambling disorders in adolescents is still unclear. However, these drugs may strengthen the current treatment approach and better help young people cope with their gambling addiction.

Zito, J., Safer, D., dosReis, S., Gardner, J., Magder, L., Soeken, K., Boles, M., Lynch, F., & Riddle, M. (2003). Psychotropic Practice Patterns for Youth – A 10-Year Perspective. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, 157(1), 17-25.