

Recreational Use of Ritalin on College Campuses

by Daniel Ari Kapner

Although alcohol is the most abused drug on college campuses, Ritalin has also attracted much concern in recent years. This *Infofacts/Resources* describes Ritalin use on college campuses, outlines possible effects of its abuse, and recommends policies for institutions of higher education.



What Is Ritalin Abuse?

Ritalin, also known as methylphenidate, is the common treatment for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), a condition affecting 3–5 percent of the U.S. population. Ritalin is occasionally prescribed for narcolepsy.¹

In recent years, Ritalin has become one of the most abused prescription drugs. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) classifies Ritalin as a schedule 2 drug, a substance with a large potential for misuse.² Street terms for Ritalin include “vitamin R,” “R ball,” and “cramming drug.”

Prescribed Ritalin costs 25–50 cents per tablet. Ritalin’s street value may be as much as \$3 to \$15 per tablet.³

For additional information

The Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention

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Whereas college students once drank excessive amounts of coffee or took caffeine pills to stay awake while cramming for tests, many now use Ritalin to remain alert.⁴ Anecdotal evidence suggests that Ritalin can allow students to stay awake for many hours in a row and maintain abnormally high levels of concentration. Students have used it to cram for as long as a few days.⁵ Some students use Ritalin so they can consume more alcohol or mix it with other drugs to prolong partying.^{3, 5, 6}

Although some students take Ritalin tablets whole, others pursue stronger stimulation by crushing tablets and snorting them. Still others grind the tablets, mix them with water, “cook” them, and inject the mix intravenously.⁷

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) bans Ritalin, except for medical exceptions, and the U.S. Olympic Committee and the International Olympic Committee also ban the stimulant.⁸



How Prevalent Is Ritalin Abuse?

Ritalin is widely available. Nineteen million prescriptions were filled in 1999, a rise of 500 percent since 1991.⁹ Although there are no national surveys documenting Ritalin abuse on college campuses, several studies indicate that it is widespread.

- In a 2002 survey of students at the University of Florida, 1.5 percent used Ritalin recreationally in the previous 30 days.¹⁰
- In a 2000 survey, 16 percent of students at a small public liberal arts college reported having tried Ritalin recreationally, and 12.7 percent reported having taken it intranasally.¹¹

- A 2000 survey at the University of Pennsylvania found that almost 9 percent of undergraduates had used someone else’s prescription medications, many of which were Ritalin.²
- A 1998 survey of students at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, found that 20 percent of students had illegally taken Ritalin or a similar drug at least once in their lives.⁴
- A 1997 survey of Texas university students concluded that 1.5 percent of students had misused Ritalin during the past year and that 2 percent had done so at some point in their lives.¹²

Increasing numbers of students are using Ritalin without a prescription at younger ages. A 1997 survey of 44,232 high school students by Indiana University found that almost 7 percent had used Ritalin recreationally at least once during the previous year.¹³ In a more recent study of 6,000 high school students in Massachusetts, 13 percent were found to have abused Ritalin.¹⁴ The same study found that 4 percent of middle school students had also abused Ritalin at some point in their lives.⁹



Possible Effects of Ritalin Abuse

Since Ritalin is a prescribed medication, students often mistakenly consider it innocent and harmless, without the stigma associated with street drugs.⁹ In fact, illegal Ritalin use can be very dangerous, with effects similar to those produced by cocaine and amphetamines.¹⁵

William Bailey from Indiana University suggests that Ritalin may cause the following adverse effects:⁷



- Nervousness, insomnia
- Loss of appetite, leading to serious malnutrition
- Nausea, vomiting
- Dizziness, headaches
- Changes in heart rate and blood pressure (usually elevation of both, but occasionally depression)
- Skin rashes, itching
- Abdominal pain, weight loss, digestive problems
- Toxic psychosis, psychotic episodes, drug dependence syndrome
- Chronic use and dependence
- Severe depression upon withdrawal

Adverse effects from high doses include the following:

- Loss of appetite, leading to serious malnutrition
- Tremors, muscle twitching
- Fevers, convulsions, and headaches (may be severe)
- Irregular heartbeat and respirations (may be profound and life threatening)
- Anxiety, restlessness
- Excessive repetition of movements and meaningless tasks
- Paranoia, hallucinations, delusions
- Formication (sensation of bugs or worms crawling under the skin)
- Death (uncommon as a result of Ritalin abuse, but reports indicate Ritalin abuse has led to death)

Intravenous use of Ritalin may cause the following:

- Toxic overdose reactions
- Blood clots from scar tissue, resulting from small particles that enter the syringe
- Infections (blood poisoning, abscesses, hepatitis, HIV/AIDS)
- Scars (“tracks” and adhesions)
- Skin and circulatory problems
- Pulmonary problems (“addict’s lung,” embolisms)

In addition, snorting Ritalin through the nose causes the membrane separating the nasal passage and the brain to deteriorate, resulting in nosebleeds and damage to nasal cartilage.⁷



Ritalin Theft

Almost 2,000 instances of Ritalin theft were reported between January 1990 and May 1995, putting the drug among the top 10 most frequently stolen controlled medications.^{3,13} The DEA estimated that nearly 700,000 doses of Ritalin were stolen between January 1996 and December 1997.¹³

Officials counted 376 cases of Ritalin thefts from pharmacies in 1998.² In addition, Ritalin is often stolen from other students, parents, high school nurses’ offices, and high school teachers.



Strategies for Institutions of Higher Education

The recent increase in Ritalin abuse challenges colleges and universities to include commonly abused prescription drugs as they develop and implement prevention and enforcement efforts for alcohol and other drugs. Following are four environmental strategies for reducing Ritalin abuse.¹⁶

1. Promote Alcohol- and Other Drug-Free Social, Recreational, and Extracurricular Options and Public Service

- Sponsor alcohol- and other drug-free social and recreational options for students. Marketing efforts for these events must clearly specify the alcohol- and other drug-free guidelines for the activities.
- Sponsor and publicize volunteer and community service opportunities for students.

2. Create a Social, Academic, and Residential Environment That Promotes Healthy Social Norms

- Survey students to determine the prevalence of Ritalin and other prescription drug abuse on campus.
- Offer resources to educate students about the dangers of Ritalin abuse.
- Develop social norms marketing campaigns to address any exaggerated misperceptions of Ritalin and other prescription drug abuse.¹⁷

3. Limit Availability and Access

- Work with local law enforcement to stay informed about trends relating to Ritalin abuse and theft in the area.
- Work with campus health officials and doctors to monitor students’ Ritalin requests.

4. Enforce Campus Policy and State and Local Laws

- Revise campus alcohol and other drug policies as necessary to include commonly abused prescription drugs specifically.
- Communicate campus alcohol and other drug policies clearly and frequently to the community, including possible consequences for violations.



Pursuing Further Research

Other than a few surveys, most information about Ritalin abuse on campus is anecdotal. National surveys should include questions about the recreational use of Ritalin to create a more comprehensive understanding of its prevalence on campuses. Patterns of student use, implications for academic performance, and correlations with other social issues are potential areas for further study.

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References

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16. For more information about environmental strategies for alcohol and other drug prevention, see the Higher Education Center's publication *Environmental Management: A Comprehensive Strategy for Reducing Alcohol and Other Drug Use on College Campuses*.
17. For more information about social norms marketing, see the Higher Education Center's publication *Social Marketing Strategies for Campus Prevention of Alcohol and Other Drug Problems* and the Center's Social Norms and Social Marketing page at www.higheredcenter.org.



The Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention

The U.S. Department of Education's Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention assists institutions of higher education nationwide in developing, implementing, and evaluating alcohol and other drug prevention policies and programs that will foster students' academic and social development and promote campus and community safety. The Center provides training; technical assistance; assessment, evaluation, and analysis activities; publications; and support for The Network: Addressing Collegiate Alcohol and Other Drug Issues. (See page 1 for contact information.)



Other Organizations

Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA)

2401 Jefferson Davis Highway
 Alexandria, VA 22301
www.dea.gov/
 (800) 882-9539
 The DEA operates in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Justice. It provides information regarding specific drugs, statistics, and national programs targeted at curbing drug abuse. The DEA's fact sheet on Ritalin, geared toward law enforcement, can be found online at www.dea.gov/concern/methylphenidate.html.

National Association of Drug Diversion Investigators, Inc.

PO Box 42015
 Baltimore, MD 21284-2015
www.naddi.org/
 (888) 39-NADDI
 In addition to the most recent drug diversion news, NADDI offers a helpline devoted to answering questions about prescription drug abuse. Full access to this site requires a subscription.



Indiana Prevention Resource Center (IPRC)

Indiana University
Creative Arts Building
2735 E 10th Street, Rm 110
Bloomington, IN 47408-2606
www.drugs.indiana.edu/
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The Indiana Prevention Resource Center at Indiana University is a statewide clearinghouse for prevention, technical assistance, and information about alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs for the state of Indiana. It is Indiana's officially designated RADAR (Regional Alcohol and Drug Awareness Resource) Network State Center. IPRC offers fact sheets and other information regarding alcohol and other drugs. IPRC's fact sheet on Ritalin abuse can be found online at www.drugs.indiana.edu/publications/iprc/factline/ritalin.html.

National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA)

National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA)
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NIDA's mission is to lead the nation in bringing the power of science to bear on drug abuse and addiction. This charge has two critical components: The first is to support and conduct research across a broad range of disciplines. The second is to ensure that these research results are disseminated and implemented rapidly and effectively, thus significantly improving the prevention and treatment of drug abuse and addiction. NIDA's fact sheet on Ritalin abuse is available online at www.nida.nih.gov/Infofax/ritalin.html. NIDA has also published a research report on prescription drug abuse, available online at www.nida.nih.gov/ResearchReports/Prescription/Prescription.html.

The Network: Addressing Collegiate Alcohol and Other Drug Issues

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www.higheredcenter.org/network/
The Network (formerly known as the Network of Colleges and Universities Committed to the Elimination of Drug and Alcohol Abuse) is a national consortium of colleges and universities formed to promote healthy campus environments by addressing the issues of alcohol, other drugs, and violence. Begun in 1987 by the U.S. Department of Education, The Network comprises member institutions that voluntarily agree to adhere to a set of standards aimed at reducing AOD problems at colleges and universities. It has close to 1,500 members nationwide. The Network develops collaborative alcohol and other drug prevention efforts among colleges and universities through electronic information exchange, printed materials, and sponsorship of national, regional, and state activities and conferences.



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