‘Study Drug’ Abuse:
What Parents and School Officials Need to Know

For teens struggling in school, the idea of a magic pill that boosts grades is alluring. Some students think stimulants prescribed for attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) will help them stay awake longer and improve their concentration, leading to better school performance and test scores. They may turn to these so-called ‘study drugs’ even if they have not been diagnosed with ADHD. Common brand names of these drugs include Adderall, Concerta, Ritalin, and Vyvanse. Will these drugs help?

ADHD is a condition in which chemicals called neurotransmitters are less active in certain parts of the brain. This creates problems such as over-activity, difficulty focusing attention, and less self-control. The condition is usually diagnosed in childhood, and some people continue to experience these symptoms as adults. It may seem ironic that people who are hyperactive and unable to concentrate can be calmed and focused by stimulants. But the drugs do offer help by correcting the imbalance of brain chemicals.

Serious Lung Illness Linked to Vaping

The Blue Ridge Poison Center at University of Virginia Health joins the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in alerting the public to nearly 200 cases—and growing—of lung illnesses which appear to be linked to vaping. Many victims have experienced life-

POISON TRIVIA

This brightly colored animal might poison you if you touch it in the wild. But when raised in captivity, it is harmless. What is it?

Answer: page 2
Teens may wrongly assume that these drugs are perfectly safe to use for non-medical purposes because a doctor prescribed them—and a doctor would not recommend anything dangerous to a patient. However, using someone else’s ADHD medicine does not make you smarter, has not been shown to result in better test scores or grades, and in fact could cause harm.

“Taking ADHD medication when you do not have that condition increases the likelihood that you will experience adverse effects such as irregular heartbeat, increased blood pressure, anxiety, paranoia, dizziness, headache, mouth dryness, and inability to sleep.” says Dr. Christopher Holstege, Medical Director of the Blue Ridge Poison Center. “It could also react poorly with other medicines you might already be taking, or with certain pre-existing medical conditions or allergies.” People with ADHD do not develop a tolerance to the drug’s therapeutic benefits. But abusers may develop a tolerance to the effects of a stimulant. Over time, they may need higher and higher doses to achieve the same results. This could lead to an unintentional overdose. ‘Study drug’ abusers may experience cravings and suffer from withdrawal symptoms including exhaustion, depression, and panic.

The good news is that teen ADHD medicine abuse has declined slightly but steadily in the past 18 years. Still--more work needs to be done. The 2018 Monitoring the Future study found that 8.6% of seniors report non-medical use of any prescription stimulants at least once in their lifetime.

Advice for parents and caregivers to help prevent ‘study drug’ abuse:

☑ Help your teen develop healthy, effective study habits. A teen suffering from stress or anxiety may need professional help. Your family healthcare provider can guide you.
☐ Talk to your teen about the dangers of sharing pills. Remind them that it is also illegal to share prescription medicine.
☐ Keep track of medicines in your home. Know how many pills are in each prescription, and what they look like. You should be able to notice if any are missing or have been replaced.

One final note: ADHD medications can be dangerous to a young child, even in small doses. Keep all medicines UP & AWAY, out of the sight and reach of young children, and monitor older children who take medicine.

For more information, we recommend the Drug Facts page on Prescription Stimulants from the National Institute on Drug Abuse: https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/prescription-stimulants.

threatening symptoms and needed emergency hospital care. As of the date of this publication, one of the victims has died.

The cases are primarily clustered in Wisconsin, but several other states have seen cases including Illinois and Pennsylvania. Patients reported using an electronic vaping device within a few weeks of the onset of symptoms, often with a vape liquid which contained THC, the active ingredient in marijuana.

Health officials say the symptoms become progressively worse over several days and mimic a viral illness (like the flu) or a heart attack. Symptoms include:

- Fever, nausea, vomiting
- Shortness of breath, cough, chest pain

If anyone is experiencing symptoms and has used a vaping device in the past few weeks, please seek medical care as soon as possible. The Blue Ridge Poison Center is available 24/7 to answer questions and offer advice: 1-800-222-1222. Poison centers across the U.S. will be working with their local health agencies to track and manage these cases.

EDUCATORS: Here are some resources to help you teach poisoning prevention in the classroom. Contact Kristin Wenger for more information: KLW2S@VIRGINIA.EDU or 434-982-4386.

PRESCHOOL—KINDERGARTEN
Order your free copy of Spike’s Poisoning Prevention Adventure, an 8-minute video featuring songs and puppets to teach children not to touch, taste, or smell unfamiliar items. Included with the DVD is a lesson plan with a follow-up activity and a printable parent letter.

GRADES 5-8
Research shows kids begin taking medicine by themselves around age 11. Scholastic partnered with U.S. poison centers and JJCI to develop a free, evidence-based program to teach over-the-counter medicine safety. All program materials are online, including lesson plans, videos, games, stories, classroom worksheets, and parent newsletters. Highly recommended! http://www.scholastic.com/otc-med-safety/

GRADES 9-12 (and adults, too)
POISON JEOPARDY! is a fun, interactive game to teach poisoning prevention to teens and young adults. The program mainly addresses poisons that affect these ages, including opioids and other medicines, e-cigarettes, substances of abuse, etc. It also discusses childhood poisoning prevention and poisons found in nature. Free! www.brpc.virginia.edu. Choose The Learning Center, then click on Multimedia.