

Prescription Stimulants

Appropriate use and risks

Stimulants are commonly prescribed medications to treat ADHD in children and youth.¹ Stimulants, when used appropriately, are important and helpful for those diagnosed with ADHD; however, there is an increase in stimulant misuse in youth and young adults.² North America (including Alberta^{3,4}) have high and increasing rates of ADHD diagnoses and prescriptions for stimulants, which raises concerns about over diagnosing, over prescribing and potential misuse. Prescription stimulant misuse means using a medication differently than it was prescribed;² for example, using a prescription more often or in higher amounts than was prescribed or using someone else's prescription.

Prescription stimulant use is not associated with an increased risk of future substance use when used as prescribed.¹ Studies show that children and youth who misuse prescription stimulants have an increased risk for using cocaine or methamphetamine later in life.¹ Recent surveys in the United States found that about 1 in 10 grade 12 students had misused prescription stimulants and that 1 in 12 grade 12 students had used cocaine.² According to similar studies in the United States, schools with higher rates of prescribed stimulant therapy have higher rates of prescription stimulant misuse and diversion of medication is not uncommon.⁴ Therefore it is important that adults have conversations with youth about appropriate use of their medications.

Stimulants are effective when used correctly and as prescribed.¹

Those who misuse prescription stimulants are more likely to use other illicit substances too.^{1,2}

The rates of misuse require monitoring, screening and intervention by health professionals.^{1,2,3}

Earlier onset of prescription stimulant misuse leads to a higher likelihood of future cocaine/meth use.²

Children and youth with and without ADHD who misuse prescriptions are at risk.²

High school and post secondary students have a high frequency of prescription stimulant misuse.⁴

Facts

- Rates of prescribing continue to increase.^{1,3}
- Misuse of these medications can cause serious harms.^{1,2}
- A critical time for screening and prevention is when young adults begin to become responsible for their own medication management.^{1,2}
- Alberta monitors prescription stimulant use and prescribing rates.³
- Governments should use regulatory means to combat overprescribing of any psychoactive medication with abuse potential.^{1,2,3}

1. McCabe SE, Schulenberg JE, Wilens TE, Schepis TS, McCabe VV, Veliz PT. Cocaine or Methamphetamine Use During Young Adulthood Following Stimulant Use for Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder During Adolescence. *JAMA NetwOpen*. 2023 July 11;6(7):e2322650.
2. McCabe SE, Schepis TS, Schulenberg JE, Wilens TE, Veliz PT. Is Early Onset of Nonmedical Prescription Stimulant Use Associated With Cocaine Use During Adolescence? Results From a National Study. *Substance Use & Addiction Journal*. 2024 Apr;45(2):314-24.
3. Dubois C, Ye M, Weaver O, Samanani S, Jess E, Gilani F, et al. Measures of stimulant medications: A population-based study in Alberta, Canada. *Emerging Trends in Drugs, Addictions, and Health*. 2024 Dec;4:100159.
4. McCabe SE, Schulenberg JE, Wilens TE, Schepis TS, McCabe VV, Veliz PT. Prescription Stimulant Medical and Nonmedical Use Among US Secondary School Students, 2005 to 2020. *JAMA NetwOpen*. 2023 Apr 18;6(4):e238707.