

## ***Myth 9 Fact Sheet: “Smart Drugs fuel my brain and boost my academic performance”***

**Wouldn't we all like to do better at school or work? A lot of achievement with little effort? Sounds too good to be true and yet the idea of smart drugs, allowing us to tap into hidden potentials is one that is pushed in our society through books and movies for many years. Here are the things you need to know to get the facts straight...**

### **What are smart drugs?**

“Smart drugs” often refer to non-medical use of prescription stimulants (NMUPS)<sup>1</sup>. This means medication that has either not been prescribed by a health professional or is not being taken at the dosage at which it was prescribed. Common examples include Adderall and Ritalin, which are stimulants used to treat Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)<sup>2</sup>.

These substances speed up our brain activity, giving the sensation of being less fidgety and more concentrated on the task at hand<sup>3</sup>. This has led to the misconception that it boosts intelligence, which in turn has had a widespread effect on our communities.

### **How common is it?**

Current studies show that in the United States alone almost three fourths of college students reported using Adderall in the past year, while one fourth used Ritalin!<sup>4</sup> Stimulants have also been reported to be on a notable rise in some South America, in particular Brazil and Argentina. The past year prevalence regarding the non-medical use of prescription drugs lay at 1.7 per cent among college students in the last four years of primary school and first three years of secondary school.<sup>5</sup>

### **What makes it so prevalent?**

Research suggests that most users have a lower GPA than others, lack self-confidence and suffer from attention difficulties.<sup>6</sup> Especially amongst students, it can feel like there is a lot of pressure for high academic achievement. To balance a lot of school homework, tests and essays, as well as a social life can feel like too much to ask. Naturally, an easy fix to achieve can seem tempting. However, there is a big misconception that taking smart drugs will allow the student to pull all-nighters to meet deadlines, perform better at tests and improve grades substantially<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3558594/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/10591283>

<sup>3</sup> <https://search.proquest.com/docview/225236218?pq-origsite=gscholar>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1794223/>

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.incb.org/documents/Publications/AnnualReports/AR2014/English/AR\\_2014.pdf](http://www.incb.org/documents/Publications/AnnualReports/AR2014/English/AR_2014.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <http://medicineabuseproject.org/assets/documents/NPSFactSheet.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35091574>

## What are the risks?

- **Being out of touch with the natural needs and restraints of your body.** Your body works in a balance of action and relaxation. Only if you take the right amount of rest at the right times, can your batteries recharge and make sure you have all the energy your body needs to take action again. In fact, your memory for example works best when you get enough sleep<sup>8</sup>. Smart drugs overrun this natural monitoring and regulation system, meaning it can have short and long term consequences for your body<sup>9</sup>. This does not only refer to taking too high of a dosage but also taking a non-prescribed dosage over a long period of time.
- **Taking smart drugs becomes normal.** Especially, when it feels as though others are doing it, it can be easy to give in and forget the risks. Moreover, taking smart drugs to push our ability in our field could easily spill over into taking pills to push skills in other fields, such as sports. This may give the impression that taking smart drugs becomes the norm and not taking them would mean we are significantly worse at performing a task. However, the momentary sensation of being more concentrated is short term and can easily lead to feeling that more of the substance is needed in shorter periods of time to achieve the same effect<sup>10</sup>.
- **Side effects outweigh the perceived benefits.** Any drug comes with side effects, and a day full of concentration can mean several sleepless nights to follow. Aside from severe sleep disorder, you may also experience dehydration, headaches, loss of appetite, numbing of emotions, psychosis or heart problems<sup>11</sup>.
- **When taking one drug, the threshold of taking another is lower.** Not just does how often we take drugs becomes more frequent but also the types of drugs we take. Studies have shown that when an individual is familiar with one type of drug they are more likely to also take another type of drug<sup>12</sup>. This follows the thought of having easy fixes to feel happy, or sleepy or concentrated etc. Knowing about side effects now, you know that ignoring the body's natural balance comes at a price.
- **No medical guidance.** Without discussing with a health professional it is hard to know what dosage of any drug is harmful to you and your body. Often, you cannot even be sure whether the smart drug taken includes some or even any of the substances you think it does and what else it may be laced with. Even with controlled substances, sold in pharmacies, you run the risk of not knowing how it will affect your body as all of us are different based on gender, weight, medical history etc.<sup>13</sup>

**Smart drugs can seem like an easy fix when cramming for a deadline but don't underestimate the risks. As with all drugs they come with side effects and can damage your body.**

**Show us how much this topic means to you and share your thoughts by taking part in our Fact Sheet Challenge! ----->**

FYI: Look at our *Myth 9: "The non-medical use of prescription drugs is safe and legal"* fact sheet for more information on this topic: <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/prevention/youth-initiative/factsheets-and-activities.html>

<sup>8</sup> <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2006.01799.x>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/methamphetamine>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/17581453>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3489818/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/18174822>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3950535/>