

[IMAGE]

Racking Our Children's Brains

Medications once intended only for adults are being prescribed to children at an alarming rate. The problem is that the potential dangers of allowing children to take many drugs are uncertain: Most of the research on these medications has only been performed thoroughly on adults. Psychiatric drugs, such as the stimulants Ritalin and Dexedrine, are now being prescribed for behavioral or emotional problems in children.

Researchers writing in the *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* evaluated data on approximately 900,000 children under age 20 enrolled in one of three health-care systems: a Midwestern or mid-Atlantic Medicaid program, or an HMO organization in the northwestern U.S. Data were analyzed for each year from 1987 through 1996, focusing on psychiatric drug use.

Total use of mood-altering medications by children increased by 2-3 times (varying by health-care system) over the 10-year period. Approximately 6% of youths younger than age 20 were taking at least one of these drugs by 1996. Most of the increase in drug prescriptions occurred in the last five years of the study period. "Mood stabilizers" accounted for much of the increase; for example, Ritalin accounted for 77-87% of all stimulant use. Stimulants and antidepressants ranked first and second across all three health-care systems, with the most dramatic increases seen in amphetamine use - under the HMO, 15 times more children were on these drugs in 1996, compared to just 10 years earlier.

Are American children being overmedicated? According to this study, utilization of psychiatric medications in youths nearly reached adult usage levels over a single decade. These facts may be depressing - but please don't start taking a drug without consulting thoroughly with a health care professional first, and investigate all the options before starting your child on any medication.

Reference:

Zito JM, Safer DJ, et al. Psychotropic practice patterns for youth: A 10-year perspective. *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* 2003;157(1), pp. 17-25.

For more information on the potential dangers of drugs, visit www.chiroweb.com/find/archives/general/consumer/index.html.

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