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The Use of ADHD Medication for Weight Control Purposes in a Suburban High School Population

Background: The misuse of ADHD medications as weight loss supplements is a growing concern as an increasing number of young adults have reported using these medications for purposes other than intended. Misuse of these medications has been found to be greater in white college-age respondents. High school students are especially susceptible to body image issues and may be at an increased risk for eating pathology, and therefore the misuse of ADHD medications. This research will investigate the link between the use of these medications and disordered eating, weight loss motivations, attitudes around food and stress, as well as other weight loss behaviors in a suburban high school setting.

Methods: 89 adolescent subjects from a high SES suburban high school were surveyed. Questions related to identity, dieting, body image, ability to cope, weight loss behaviors, and the use of ADHD medications. There were 61 female respondents and 28 male respondents, ages 14 – 18. Students who returned PARENTAL consent forms were emailed the survey, which they were informed was completely anonymous.

Results: Results showed that 11.6% of students surveyed reported to having used ADHD medications once or more in the past year. 66.7% of these students reported weight loss control aspects contributing to use. 14.9% of the overall population reported using laxatives once or more in the past year, compared to 37.5% in the population who had used ADHD medications. 66.7% of this group reported to having used them for weight loss purposes as compared to 2.3% overall population. 44.4% of the ADHD users reported using diet pills once or more in the past year, compared to 10.4% of the overall population. 22.2% of the ADHD users reported vomiting at least once in the past year to lose weight compared to 11.2% of the population surveyed. 66.67% of the ADHD users reported that they feared becoming "fat" frequently (always- often). Of the overall population, 39.77% reported experiencing this fear frequently. 55.56% of ADHD users were not prescribed the medications, and 60% reported that they maintained this medication because it was prescribed to a family member. 87.5% of ADHD users said that if the drug were readily available to them they would likely use it weight loss purposes, as compared to 39.02% of the overall population.

Conclusions: This study shows that students who use ADHD medications are more likely to have unhealthy weight loss/ management behaviors than the overall population. It also illustrates the frequency of use of these medications, and the use of them even without prescription. Lastly, this study shows students willingness to use this medication for weight loss, which is a harmful weight loss behavior.