

## **INCREASED DRUG PRESCRIBED FOR CHILDREN**

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Doctors are prescribing stimulants such as Ritalin and antidepressants such as Prozac for preschoolers at rates that appear to be rising rapidly, according to a new study released in the Journal of American Medical Association (February 2000). The study, covering children age 2 to 4 in three large health systems in different parts of the United States, found the use of such drugs had doubled or even tripled from 1991 to 1995. The rapid increase occurred despite the fact that none of the most commonly used of these drugs has been approved for children under 6 and little research has been done on the medicines' effects on children so young.

The knowledge base to support the effectiveness and safety of these medicines in preschool-age children is certainly insufficient. There's no dosing information for these children with these medications. Although previous studies have documented a rapid increase in Ritalin use among older children in recent years, the new study is the most comprehensive effort so far to examine the use of such drugs in preschoolers.

The study analyzed data from two state Medicaid programs and a health maintenance organization and found that as many as 1.5 percent of children 2 to 4 years old were receiving stimulants, antidepressants or antipsychotic drugs--a group that includes "major tranquilizers" such as thiorazine. The findings suggest that, nationally, as many as 150,000 children in this age group were taking such medicines in 1995, up from about 100,000 in 1991. The use of antidepressants almost doubled and the use of stimulants almost tripled in the programs studied. The study does not describe what conditions the children were being treated for, or whether the drugs were prescribed by pediatricians, family practitioners or psychiatrists. These researchers did, however, find that the growing use of stimulants and antidepressants in preschoolers is undoubtedly related to a recent national increase in the use of such drugs to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in older children. As many as 2 million elementary school children in the United States are thought to have ADHD, and during the 1990s the number receiving Ritalin, amphetamines and other stimulants has almost tripled.

The study examined data on more than 200,000 children age 2 to 4 who were enrolled in one of three health systems--a Medicaid program in a mid-Atlantic state, a Medicaid program in the Midwest and an HMO in the Pacific Northwest. It found that from 1991 to 1995, the use of stimulants, antidepressants and clonidine in this age group increased substantially, while the use of antipsychotic drugs increased only slightly.

Stimulants (primarily Ritalin) were the category of drugs most commonly prescribed, but there was considerable geographic variation. For instance, in 1995, about 11 of every 1,000 children age 2 to 4 in the Midwestern Medicaid program received Ritalin, versus about 4 of every 1,000 in the HMO. When antidepressants were used, an older family of drugs called tricyclic antidepressants was most often chosen, but use of the newer class that includes Prozac increased dramatically from 1991 to

1995 at the two Medicaid programs. We have very little information about the long-term impact of treatment with these drugs early in development.

Stimulants such as Ritalin have been tested in preschoolers and are considered safe, but they do not work as well in this age group as in older children and are more likely to produce side effects such as sleeplessness and loss of appetite. Antidepressants such as Prozac have not been studied in preschoolers. There is also significant concern that clonidine, a blood pressure medicine with sedative effects, has been prescribed for ADHD in older children.