

More Young People Are on Multiple Psychiatric Drugs, Study Finds



By Matt Richtel

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The News

Growing numbers of children and adolescents are being prescribed multiple psychiatric drugs to take simultaneously, according to a new study by researchers at the University of Maryland. The phenomenon is increasing despite warnings that psychotropic drug combinations in young people have not been tested for safety or studied for their impact on the developing brain.

The study, published Friday in JAMA Open Network, looked at the prescribing patterns among patients 17 or younger enrolled in Medicaid from 2015 to 2020 in a single U.S. state that the researchers declined to name. In this group, there was a 9.5 percent increase in the prevalence of “polypharmacy,” which the study defined as taking three or more different classes of psychiatric medications, including antidepressants, mood-stabilizing anticonvulsants, sedatives and drugs for A.D.H.D. and anxiety drugs.

The Big Picture

The study looked at only one state, but state data have been used in the past to explore this issue, in part because of the relative ease of gathering data from Medicaid, the health insurance program administered by states.

At the same time, some research using nationally weighted samples have revealed the increasing prevalence of polypharmacy among young people. One recent paper drew data from the National Ambulatory Medical Care Survey and found that in 2015, 40.7 percent of people aged 2 to 24 in the United States who took a medication for A.D.H.D. also took a second psychiatric drug. That figure had risen from 26 percent in 2006.

The latest data from the University of Maryland researchers show that, at least in one state, the practice continues to grow and “was significantly more likely among youths who were disabled or in foster care,” the new study noted.

Mental health experts said that psychotropic medications can prove very helpful and that doctors have discretion to prescribe what they see fit. A concern among some experts is that many drugs used in frequently prescribed cocktails have not been approved for use in young people. And it is unclear how the simultaneous use of multiple psychotropic medications affects brain development long-term.

The Numbers

The latest study looked at data from 126,972 people over the study period. It found that in 2015, 4.2 percent of Medicaid enrollees under the age of 17 in Maryland had overlapping prescriptions of three or more different classes of psychiatric medications. That figure rose to 4.6 percent in 2020.

The numbers were higher for those in foster care, where the prevalence of polypharmacy rose to 11.3 percent from 10.8 percent.

“The findings emphasize the importance of monitoring the use of psychotropic combinations, particularly among vulnerable populations, such as youths enrolled in Medicaid who have a disability or are in foster care,” the study concluded.

Matt Richtel is a health and science reporter for The Times, based in Boulder, Colo. More about Matt Richtel