

The BUZZ

about the

good-grade

DRUG

Graphic by | Michael Patterson

As exams creep closer, work piles up, teachers cram in last minute tests, mounting stress drives some to risk abusing study medications

By | Layton Sussman

One day before Heath Anderson's* [16] first mid-term junior year, all he could talk about was how unprepared he felt. His Wednesday morning Latin exam meant a lot of information to memorize in a very short time, time he did not have.

He was panicking, and so his friend slid him a quick fix across the table: 40 milligrams of Vyvanse. Although he had never taken it before, and had never been formally diagnosed with an attention deficit disorder, he quickly popped the pill into his mouth.

An hour later the pill kicked in, and by 6 p.m., Anderson felt ready to conquer Latin, maybe even Rome itself.

"It made me feel really motivated to work, and it made studying enjoyable," Anderson said. "It's kind of like you drank too much coffee, but it's also like a euphoric rush. I felt really organized and confident, and it just made me focus really well."

Vyvanse is an amphetamine used to treat Attention Deficit Disorders as are other prescription medications such as Adderall and Ritalin. These stimulants increase the release of dopamine to allow more efficient communication connections in the brain, helping control concentration, hyperactivity and impulsivity, common symptoms of ADD or ADHD.

Although these medications can be used for good, if abused, they can also bring serious health and legal consequences. Anderson had just joined thousands of

other US teens who ignore the risks in hopes of better performance.

The number of prescriptions for ADHD medications dispensed to people ages 10 to 19 has risen 26 percent since 2007, to almost 21 million yearly, according to IMS Health. U.S. News and World Report states American children are three times more likely than adults to be prescribed psychotropic medications for conditions such as ADD and ADHD.

Local pediatrician James Patrick Hieber, MD, who diagnoses children with ADD and ADHD and dispenses medication, has seen it become increasingly more common for high school and college students to be diagnosed with this disorder.

This increase parallels a rise in illegal purchases and sales of these same drugs. At high schools across the country, pressure over grades and competition for college admissions encourages students to consider abusing prescription stimulants.

To do well on the rest of his exams, Anderson took Vyvanse throughout the week before studying, and continues to take

it before big tests and quizzes.

Available from friends, or for \$5-15 from a dealer, stimulants are going from rare to routine in academically competitive high schools.

Not only does Anderson take Vyvanse and other prescription ADD medications, he now sells and trades them to friends who also feel pressure to make top grades.

Three weeks ago, Anderson asked Tommy McGrugen* for a ride to a friend's house, and in return, Anderson slipped him a pill. "I feel great," McGrugen said while under its effects for the first time. "My mind is clear, and it's not usually clear. I feel social, and I'm normally always tired and I don't feel tired at all."

In extreme cases, students will fake symptoms to parents and doctors to finesse prescriptions. "Some people will memorize and study the behaviors and symptoms of someone who has ADD," Hieber said. "They will learn the whole ball of wax of what to tell the doctor and convince him that you have [ADD or ADHD]. There are some doctors,

it's sad to say, that might prescribe out of need for money for themselves, laziness or they're just not as up to date as they should be. It's a sad commentary on things, but it for sure happens."

Others who actually struggle with ADD or ADHD will sometimes take more than prescribed to cram for a test or exam, often not realizing the dangers of taking these drugs in excess or without the oversight of a medical professional.

"Instead of studying gradually over several days, they don't and then have to cram," Hieber said. "So, they take a way bigger dose than they are supposed to take, and it is hyper-stimulating their brain so that they can at least learn the material. But, they probably won't remember it afterwards."

The Drug Enforcement Administration, or DEA, lists prescription stimulants like Adderall, Vyvanse and Ritalin as Class 2 controlled substances—the same as cocaine and morphine—because they rank among the most addictive substances that have medical use. Class 2 controlled substances have a high potential for abuse which may lead to severe psychological or physical dependence, depression and mood swings, heart irregularities and acute exhaustion or psychosis during withdrawal. Twenty-three percent of students have these

medications, but don't take them.

"I've backed off from buying it as often because I've noticed there are some side effects with it,"

Anderson said. "It makes your heart pound, and you just feel like a zombie. I now only take it if I have a huge test to study for."

Buying and selling this medication can lead to serious legal consequences.

Possession of a drug like Adderall without a prescription, is a misdemeanor, and if convicted, someone could face up to one year in jail. If it is an offender's first time, he or she could be eligible for a drug diversion program allowing charges to be dismissed. If convicted of possession with intent to sell, punishment can be five to 20 years in prison, a \$250,000 to \$5 million fine, or both. Dealers are not be eligible for the drug diversion program.

Hieber educates his patients about their potential for abuse.

"Once we decide that they are going to get this prescription, I look them in the eye and say 'don't tell your friends you are taking this so that they won't be putting pressure on you to give and/or to sell them some,'" Hieber said. "Figure out some safe place where you can have it and no one else needs to know."

Despite Hieber's efforts, students like Anderson plan to use the drugs for semester exams.

**Names have been changed*

22% have been diagnosed with ADD or ADHD.

survey of 83 students, Dec. 4



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-Pediatrician James Patrick Hieber, MD

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