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ADHD Drugs Increase Psychosis Risk in Young People

Treatment with Adderall, Vyvanse, Ritalin or Concerta is more likely to trigger mental health problems in teens and young adults with ADHD.

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An estimated 5 million young people under age 25 receive amphetamines (Adderall and Vyvanse) and methylphenidates (Ritalin and Concerta) to treat attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Now, new findings published in The New England Journal of Medicine reveal that these commonly prescribed drugs are associated with an increased risk of psychosis in teens and young adults with this disorder, reports McLean Hospital, an affiliate of Harvard Medical School.

Researchers examined data from two large commercial insurance claims databases on people ages 13 to 25 years old with ADHD who started taking amphetamines or methylphenidates between 2004 and 2015.

Of these 221,846 adolescents, one out of every 486 patients who were prescribed amphetamines developed psychosis that required treatment with antipsychotic medication compared with one in 1,046 individuals who started on a methylphenidate drug.

“These findings are concerning because the use of amphetamines in adolescents and young adults has more than tripled in recent years,” said Lauren V. Moran, MD, the lead study author. “There is not a lot of research comparing the safety profiles of amphetamines and methylphenidate, despite increasing use of these medications.”

Moran noted that the participants of the study were limited to only youth who were recently diagnosed with ADHD and started treatment. (This suggests that it’s unlikely that those who have taken such drugs as prescribed for a while and tolerated the med would experience this problem.)

According to Sebastian Schneeweiss, MD, ScD, a professor at Harvard Medical School, another author of the inquiry, the results illustrate the importance of using real-world data from diverse patients so physicians can better understand the safety of commonly prescribed ADHD medications to weigh their benefits and risks.

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