

focus

motivation

malnutrition

Prescription for disaster?

Need keen concentration? Knock back some Ritalin and get focused, say an increasing number of people. But the fad for abusing this prescription drug has a darker side, with terrifying implications.

Natalie*, a dazzling blonde 22-year-old business student, pulls up a chair in a crowded coffee shop, ignores the menu and launches into a rave about her school days as an A-grader, hockey player and class leader. These days, however, she's not as carefree and level-headed. She looks flustered, talks quickly and seems distracted – like she's in a rush to get some place else. The reason? Like an increasing number of adults, Natalie is dependent on Ritalin (methylphenidate), a central nervous system stimulant, that's usually used to treat ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) and narcolepsy, primarily in children. Except that Natalie doesn't suffer from ADD. She uses the medication to increase her concentration during exams when she needs to get through a massive syllabus.

"The first time a friend mentioned Rits

as a study drug, I was shocked," she says, fidgeting with her handbag strap. "I told him he was being careless and insisted that I'd never take it. Now I manipulate my doctor into prescribing it for me. At first he said no, but I turned on the tears and eventually he agreed. And that was 10 months ago. Of course I could have got some from friends, but I thought a prescription would make it legit."

Generation Rx

South Africa's Medical Control Council classifies Ritalin as a schedule six prescription drug, indicating its high potential for abuse. And the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) guideline is that it should be available with a one-month prescription only. But that doesn't account for people like Natalie, who use it as a performance enhancer because of its stimulant

effects – effects that, over time, can be as powerful as those induced by cocaine.

"Ritalin causes appetite suppression, wakefulness, euphoria and increased concentration and focus," says ADHD specialist and psychiatrist, Dr Shabeer Jeeva. Health and trauma psychologist Dr Helgo Schomer adds, "It increases the brain's levels of dopamine, the chemical associated with pleasure, and this is the source of its 'high'. Over time, Ritalin users will build up a tolerance to the drug and require more and more to get the same effect."

As for the side effects? These begin with headaches, sleep disturbance, agitation and anxiety – and gradually escalate. "Ritalin abuse can cause full-blown insomnia, malnutrition (especially in women), aggression and even heart attacks in some users as young as 16," says Dr Schomer.



paranoia

So how much Rits abuse is going on? One recent report by the American National Institute on Drug Abuse showed a sevenfold increase over a seven-year study period in the US, and while local statistics are sketchy due to lack of research, Dr Schomer says, “We’re definitely creeping steadily towards the US numbers”. David Bayever, deputy chairperson of the Central Drug Authority adds, “Some reports estimate that up to 25% of school and university students use a stimulant to help them study, including Ritalin, Adderall, Concerta, cocaine and even over-the-counter herbal products.”

On the streets

Honours student Caitlin*, 23, has taken Ritalin for almost two years. “I had some depression symptoms and I exaggerated them to get a prescription,” she admits.

She often loses her appetite on Rits, but when a big exam rolls around, out come the tablets. “It’s my way to concentrate for long periods of time without getting tired. Whatever the side effects, Rits helps me and I’ll keep using it if I have a stressful job in the future.”

A prescription isn’t always necessary either. Where there’s demand, there’s supply, and Ritalin is easily available on the streets, where it’s known as ‘Vitamin-R’, ‘R-balls’, ‘Rits’ or ‘kiddies’ cocaine’. James*, a 22-year-old engineering student, and Hannah*, 21, both buy Ritalin from friends – no questions asked. “Another guy I know doesn’t use all the pills he’s prescribed, so he sells his spares for up to R10 a pop, with discounts for frequent buyers,” says James. “During a heavy exam term he makes up to R1 500 a week.”

While the method is deeply troubling and the risks high, it isn’t hard to see why



She snorted it like cocaine. Mixed with alcohol, she almost killed herself.



these users feel such pressure to enhance their performance. “Taking Ritalin won’t automatically provide success or A grades, but it can increase performance by 10-20%” says Dr Jeeva. “Our hugely competitive world places immense pressure on us to achieve, so Ritalin seems like a quick fix, the easy way out.”

And it does have amazing effects – albeit at a terrifying emotional, physical and psychological price. “Normally I would study a section of work and skip to the next bit if I don’t understand it,” says Natalie. “On Ritalin, I’m so focused that I *need* to understand every detail before moving on.” James claims that

with Ritalin he can “learn a 200-page textbook in one sitting and easily study for up to five hours straight”. And Caitlin says Ritalin makes her “motivated to work and able to study better and faster.”

But as David warns, “Our chemically complacent society promotes the idea that there’s a quick fix for our problems in a bottle, which just isn’t true.”

Kristen*, a 22-year-old honours student, took Ritalin for five years until the excruciating headaches it induced every night made it impossible to keep going. And users like Natalie are ashamed of the changes in their personalities. “I scream at my brother for no reason, and something as small as a squeaking door handle can drive me over the edge,” she says.

Beyond its considerable physical, psychological and emotional side effects, Ritalin has an insidious effect on the abuser’s attitude – and ultimately, attitude is one of the greatest factors for future success. “In the long run, Ritalin abuse is a short-term, easy way out that can cripple a person’s ability to acquire new skills and earn achievements,” says Dr Schomer.

Hidden danger

So why is this abuse not being picked up – or at least seen for the danger it represents? One of the reasons, says David, is the fact that Ritalin is a prescription drug, so less stigmatised than cocaine and tik. “People aren’t inclined to see medication from a trusted pharmacist or doctor as a controlled substance, so they don’t hear the alarm bells until it’s too late,” he says. And dependency sets in fast. “I just don’t feel I can achieve the same standards without Ritalin,” says Natalie. “I feel anxious when I get near the end of my prescription and I’m always scheming up ways to keep getting my fix.”

Not such a fairytale

If the side effects weren’t bad enough, Ritalin’s powers are far from foolproof. Finance student Kyle* says, “Nearly ▶

every postgrad accounting student I know is taking Ritalin, so I thought ‘why not?’ I experimented with different doses and one tablet every five hours seemed to do the trick, although I got extremely agitated while I was studying. I sat down to write the exam and realised I hadn’t retained a thing. I scored a dismal 33%.”

Like most drugs, Ritalin affects every individual differently. “A proper doctor’s visit assesses how much medication is needed,” says Dr Jeeva. “You can’t simply think that if your friend was prescribed 10mg, 10mg will be fine for you.”

Greg*, another user, understands this only too well. “Alison*, a girl I know, had two big exams within two days and she was finding the stress unbearable,” he

says. “She got two 10mg tablets from a friend and took both, thinking the effect would equal a single 20mg tab. But that’s not how the medication functions. The dose messed up her entire system and she spent the night in horror, sitting on the floor, and rocking back and forth.”

Then there are the reckless partygoers, who even snort it for a high. Camilla*, 20, decided to take Ritalin to the next level. She crushed her tablet, snorted it like cocaine, added alcohol to the mix – and almost killed herself. This trend for adopting Rits as a party drug has been growing at a disturbing rate, although a newer form of the medication – Concerta – is designed to be uncrushable, so that it cannot be snorted.

The bottom line

So how do the legalities play out? “You cannot legally be in possession of Ritalin without a valid prescription,” says David. The crux of the matter? Anyone caught using Rits for non-medical reasons could face criminal charges.

As with everything in life, the ball is in your court. You can cheat the system, or learn to play the game. And when temporary satisfaction comes at the risk of shocking psychological and emotional side effects, is short-term victory worth crippling a future for?

Need help for Ritalin abuse? Call 0800 121 314 or SMS 32312. Or, get more info on Dr Jeeva’s site: adhclinicjeeva.com.

4 Steps to Rits-free focus

Health and trauma psychologist, Dr Helgo Schomer, shares tips for conquering stress the natural (and effective!) way. So before you pop a pill, try these simple tricks...

1 Water your brain

Step away from the Red Bull! “Sugar in energy drinks triggers anxiety, as it causes a spike, followed by a rapid drop in glucose levels,” says Dr Schomer. What you do need to drink: H₂O! “Drinking water regularly will help you stay awake. Just maintain your intake; 1.5 litres is good, 2 litres is great and 2.5 litres is fantastic. Keep a bottle on your desk while you work, and carry it with you. You don’t need huge gulps, just sip on it often,” Dr Schomer advises.



2 Get some shut-eye

We all need beauty sleep, but ‘brainy’ sleep is even more important when stress comes knocking! During sleep, the brain transforms working memory into long-term memory, sorting content you’ve learned into categories, which helps you store information. “Two weeks before a deadline, establish a routine where you sleep and wake up at the same time every day, allowing yourself at least six hours a night,” suggests Dr Schomer. “If worries wake you



at night, don’t lie there and fret; turn on the lights and jot down your concerns. You’ll feel more in charge and able to cope – which means a peaceful sleep.”

3 Hit the gym

Reading the same sentence for the hundredth time? Stop working and take a break. “When you start feeling fidgety, get moving,” says Dr Schomer. Anything from a quick jaunt around the office to a session of weights will do. “Exercise reduces tension in the spine, neck and jaw and increases metabolism, blood flow and oxygen, making you feel more awake.”

4 Snack on brain food

Steer away from sweets and put down that burger! “Sugar only gives you a short-term high, and heavy meals will make you feel sluggish”, says Dr Schomer. “It’s much better to stick to fruit, veggies and low GI foods, like wholewheat toast. And remember, fish really is the best brain food you can get!”