

Worry Over Attention Deficit Cases

It is hard not to be concerned about the large number of children who have been given a diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, a condition that impairs the ability to focus on a task or to control impulses. A new analysis of government data found that almost one in five boys of high school age in the United States and 11 percent of school-age children over all had been reported to have the disorder at some point in their lives. The troubling question is whether they had or still have A.D.H.D. that actually needs treatment with potent drugs.

The data was gathered in a nationwide survey of more than 76,000 parents, interviewed by phone about children's health issues by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention from February 2011 to June 2012. The parents were asked if they had ever been told by a health care provider that their child had A.D.H.D. or various other medical conditions.

The Times reporters Alan Schwarz and Sarah Cohen [obtained the new data](#) from the C.D.C. and compiled the results. The survey estimated that 6.4 million children ages 4 through 17 had received a diagnosis of A.D.H.D. at some point in their lives, up from 5.4 million in 2007 and 4.4 million in 2003, as reported previously by the same parental survey.

Health providers diagnosed the disorder in 19 percent of high school boys and 10 percent of high school girls; about one in 10 high school boys currently takes prescription stimulants like Ritalin or Adderall to treat the disorder. Dr. Thomas Frieden, the director of the C.D.C., said the right drugs can help many people, but he also warned that "misuse appears to be growing at an alarming rate." Other data have shown a big rise in stimulant use, which can lead to addiction, anxiety and even psychosis.

The increase in reported cases, experts say, has been fueled by awareness of the disorder, drug company advertising, and parental pressure on doctors to prescribe drugs to help children focus. With the growing concern that many young people may be sharing or abusing these drugs, it is crucial that parents and doctors are vigilant about overmedication.