4 Use of non-medical prescription drugs

Prescription drug use for non-medical purposes

In this chapter 'prescription drug use' refers to the use for non-medical purposes of particular drugs such as pain-killers, tranquillisers, steroids and barbiturates.

In 1998 nearly one in seven Australians aged 14 years and over reported having used prescription drugs for non-medical purpose in their lifetime (Table 4.1). The 1998 survey also showed that:

- Pain-killers/analgesics were the prescription drugs most frequently cited (12%) for non-medical use, followed by tranquillisers/sleeping pills (6%), barbiturates (2%) and steroids (1%).

- Overall, lifetime use of prescription drugs such as pain-killers and sleeping pills did not differ much between males and females.

- As age increased, the proportion of people reporting lifetime use of prescription drugs for non-medical purposes decreased.

Table 4.1: Prescription drugs ever used for non-medical purposes: proportion of the population aged 14 years and over, by age and sex, Australia, 1998

Prescription drug	Age group						
	14–19	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60+	All ages
	(per cent)						
Males							
Pain-killers/analgesics	13.4	15.9	10.5	10.6	11.0	6.8	11.3
Tranquillisers/sleeping pills	3.6	10.3	6.9	8.0	1.5	2.5	5.9
Steroids	0.1 *	2.6	1.4	1.4 *	0.4 *	0.3 *	1.2
Barbiturates	0.1 *	3.6	3.5	2.7	0.7 *	0.9	2.2
Females							
Pain-killers/analgesics	14.8	16.0	11.7	11.0	11.4	7.0	11.7
Tranquillisers/sleeping pills	5.8	10.5	7.0	5.0	4.7	5.0	6.5
Steroids	0.4 *	0.4 *	0.1 *	—	1.3 *	0.4 *	0.4
Barbiturates	1.3	2.1	1.2	0.9 *	0.5 *	—	1.0
Persons							
Pain-killers/analgesics	14.1	15.9	11.1	10.8	11.2	6.9	11.5
Tranquillisers/sleeping pills	4.7	10.4	6.9	6.5	3.0	3.9	6.2
Steroids	0.3 *	1.5	0.7	0.7 *	0.9	0.4 *	0.8
Barbiturates	0.7	2.8	2.3	1.8	0.6 *	0.4 *	1.6

When the data on recent use of prescription drugs for non-medical purposes were analysed, the 1998 survey showed that more than one in 20 Australians aged 14 years and over had recently used prescription drugs for non-medical purpose (Table 4.2). As with lifetime use of prescription drugs for non-medical purposes, the survey also showed that:

- Pain-killers/analgesics were the prescription drugs most often cited for non-medical use.
- There was very little difference in the recent use of prescription drugs for non-medical purposes by males and females.
- As age increased, the proportion of Australians reporting using prescription drugs for non-medical purposes decreased.

Table 4.2: Prescription drugs recently used for non-medical purposes: proportion of the population aged 14 years and over, by age and sex, Australia, 1998

Prescription drug	Age group						
	14–19	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60+	All ages
	(per cent)						
Males							
Pain-killers/analgesics	6.1	8.1	4.9	5.6	2.2	3.6	5.2
Tranquillisers/sleeping pills	2.3	5.3	3.6	2.7	0.6 *	0.5 *	2.7
Steroids	—	0.9	0.3 *	0.6 *	—	—	0.4
Barbiturates	—	1.5	0.3 *	—	—	—	0.3
Females							
Pain-killers/analgesics	7.6	7.0	5.1	4.2	4.9	3.2	5.1
Tranquillisers/sleeping pills	3.6	5.6	2.6	1.3	3.4	3.3	3.3
Steroids	0.2 *	0.1 *	0.1 *	—	—	0.2 *	0.1 *
Barbiturates	0.4 *	0.3 *	0.3 *	—	—	—	0.2
Persons							
Pain-killers/analgesics	6.8	7.5	5.0	4.9	3.5	3.3	5.2
Tranquillisers/sleeping pills	2.9	5.4	3.1	2.0	2.0	2.0	3.0
Steroids	0.1 *	0.5	0.2 *	0.3 *	—	0.1 *	0.2
Barbiturates	0.2 *	0.9	0.3	—	—	—	0.3

Multiple drugs use with non-medical prescription drugs

The 1998 survey showed that the majority of Australians aged 14 years and over reporting using prescription drugs for non-medical purposes also used a variety of other drugs. For example, nearly nine in ten (87%) persons using prescription drugs for non-medical purposes reported using alcohol, nearly four in ten (39%) reported using tobacco, and a similar proportion (41%) reported using marijuana/cannabis (Table 4.3). The survey also showed that nearly one in five (19%) users of prescription drugs for non-medical purposes also used amphetamines, and one in ten (11%) also used ecstasy/designer drugs. There were some sex and age differences in the use of prescription drugs for non-medical purposes:

- Slightly more males (90%) than females (84%) reported using alcohol, tobacco (42% versus 36%) and marijuana/cannabis (45% versus 41%).
- As age increased, the proportion of persons reporting using other drugs in addition to prescription drugs decreased.

Table 4.3: Other drugs used by persons who have recently used prescription drugs for non-medical purposes: proportion of recent users aged 14 years and over, by age and sex, Australia, 1998

Other substances currently used	Age group 14–19	20–29	30–39	40+	All ages
	(per cent)				
Males					
Alcohol	95.0	89.2	95.9	85.7	89.8
Tobacco	54.4	61.5	44.7	21.4	42.4
Amphetamines	20.4	46.5	24.7	4.5	23.2
Marijuana/cannabis	54.4	69.5	53.0	16.3	44.8
Heroin	2.6 *	19.6	5.1	6.6	9.9
Methadone[a]	2.5 *	7.4	3.0	0.3 *	3.3
Cocaine	4.7	23.9	15.5	3.3 *	12.3
Hallucinogens	21.2	34.1	11.1	3.6 *	16.6
Ecstasy/designer drugs	6.7	32.9	10.8	—	13.0
Inhalants	7.6	10.6	7.1	—	5.6
Females					
Alcohol	87.9	91.5	84.4	77.0	83.7
Tobacco	52.2	64.4	44.7	9.2	35.6
Amphetamines	28.0	39.3	2.9 *	2.0 *	15.7
Marijuana/cannabis	72.7	62.1	29.2	13.8	38.0
Heroin	8.9	5.9	2.6 *	—	3.3
Methadone[a]	—	1.3 *	1.2 *	—	0.5
Cocaine	2.5 *	10.4	2.9 *	—	3.6
Hallucinogens	26.8	25.1	1.7 *	—	10.9
Ecstasy/designer drugs	14.0	16.5	0.7 *	4.4	8.2
Inhalants	21.1	11.6	0.1 *	—	6.1
Persons					
Alcohol	90.7	90.3	90.3	81.1	86.6
Tobacco	53.2	62.8	44.7	14.7	38.9
Amphetamines	24.8	43.1	14.1	3.1 *	19.3
Marijuana/cannabis	65.1	66.0	41.6	14.9	41.3
Heroin	6.3	13.2	3.9	3.0 *	6.5
Methadone[a]	1.1 *	4.5	2.1 *	0.2 *	1.9
Cocaine	3.4 *	17.5	9.4	1.5 *	7.8
Hallucinogens	24.5	29.9	6.5	1.7 *	13.7
Ecstasy/designer drugs	10.9	25.2	5.9	2.4 *	10.6
Inhalants	15.5	11.1	3.6	—	5.9

(a) Non-maintenance.

Note: Base equals non-medical prescription drug users.

Correlates of non-medical prescription drug use

The 1998 survey showed that education, employment status, cultural background and marital status correlate with the use of prescription drugs for non-medical purposes. For example, persons with tertiary qualifications (7%) were nearly twice as likely to report using prescription drugs compared with those not having any qualification (4%) (Table 4.4). Unemployment seems to be the biggest contributor to inappropriate use of prescription drugs, with more than one in ten (12%) of all unemployed persons aged 14 years and over reporting misusing prescription drugs. The survey also showed that:

- Persons employed in lower status jobs (7%) were more likely to report using prescription drugs for non-medical purposes compared with those working in high status jobs (4%).

- Those born in Australia (6%) were more likely to report using prescription drugs for non-medical purposes compared with persons born in non-English-speaking countries (4%) or those born in other English-speaking countries (5%).

- Persons who had never married were nearly twice (9%) as likely to report using prescription drugs for non-medical purposes as those who were presently married (5%).

Table 4.4: Correlates of use of prescription drugs for non-medical purposes: proportion of the population aged 14 years and over, Australia, 1998

Characteristics	Never used	Lifetime use	Recent use
		(per cent)	
Education			
No qualification	88.2	11.8	4.1
HSC or equivalent	89.1	10.9	5.1
Trade/diploma	82.7	17.3	5.5
Tertiary	84.2	15.8	6.9
Employment status			
Currently employed	84.6	15.4	5.9
Student	86.7	13.3	5.7
Unemployed	77.4	22.6	12.1
Retired/pension	88.9	11.1	4.7
Occupational status			
Upper (white)	87.2	12.8	4.4
Middle	86.5	13.5	5.8
Lower(blue)	83.4	16.6	7.1
Country of birth			
Australian born	85.2	14.8	6.2
Other English-speaking born	87.8	12.2	5.2
Non-English-speaking born	87.3	12.7	4.4
Socioeconomic area			
1st quintile	86.4	13.6	5.9
2nd quintile	86.8	13.2	6.3
3rd quintile	85.2	14.8	4.8
4th quintile	83.3	16.7	6.6
5th quintile	86.3	13.7	5.7
Geography			
Urban	86.3	13.7	5.8
Rural/remote	84.4	15.6	6.2
Marital status			
Never married	81.6	18.4	8.7
Widowed	91.6	8.4	6.3
Divorced/separated	86.1	13.9	4.7
Presently married	87.5	12.5	4.5