

8 Prescription drugs (used for non-medical purposes)

Introduction

In this section, prescription drugs used for non-medical purposes include: pain-killers/analgesics, tranquillisers, barbiturates and steroids.

In 2001, 3.8% (598,200) of Australians aged 14 years and over had used pain-killers, tranquillisers, barbiturates or steroids for non-medical purposes in the last 12 months; the majority of these people (85.4%) had only used one prescription drug for non-medical purposes.

The average age at which Australians first used prescription drugs for non-medical purposes ranged from 18.7 years for barbiturates to 22.8 years for tranquillisers.

Use of prescription drugs for non-medical purposes

In 2001, almost 1.3 million Australians aged 14 years and over had used prescription drugs for non-medical purposes in their lifetime (Table 8.1). Other findings include:

- Whereas males (8.4%) were more likely than females (7.6%) to have used prescription drugs for non-medical purposes in their lifetime, equal proportions of males and females (3.8%) had used these drugs in the last 12 months.
- Australians aged 20–29 years were more likely than those in the other age groups to have used prescription drugs for non-medical purposes in their lifetime (12.7%) and in the past 12 months (5.9%).

Table 8.1: Prescription drugs for non-medical purposes use, persons aged 14 years and over, by age, by sex, Australia, 2001

Period	Age group				Sex		Persons
	14–19	20–29	30–39	40+	Males	Females	
	(per cent)						
In lifetime	7.3	12.7	9.1	6.2	8.4	7.6	8.0
In the last 12 months	4.4	5.9	3.8	3.0	3.8	3.8	3.8
	(number)						
In lifetime	112,600	386,700	262,600	517,600	654,000	603,200	1,257,200
In the last 12 months	67,700	181,300	108,600	249,800	300,100	298,100	598,200

Note: Totals may not equal sum due to rounding.

Recent use of selected prescription drugs for non-medical purposes

In the last 12 months the prescription drug used for non-medical purposes by Australians aged 14 years and over was most likely to be pain-killers/analgesics (Table 8.2):

- Recent use of pain-killers/analgesics for non-medical purposes was similar between males (3.0%) and females (3.1%).
- Recent use of pain-killers/analgesics and tranquillisers/sleeping pills peaked among persons aged 20–29 years.
- Recent steroid use was low and was similar across all age groups. Recent use of barbiturates was also low with no clear trend across age groups.

Table 8.2: Recent use of selected prescription drugs, by age and sex, Australia, 2001

Prescription drug	Age group				All ages
	14–19	20–29	30–39	40+	
	(per cent)				
	Males				
Pain-killers/analgesics	2.3	4.2	3.1	2.7	3.0
Tranquillisers/sleeping pills	1.5	3.0	1.4	0.5	1.2
Steroids	0.2 *	0.2 *	0.2 *	0.2	0.2
Barbiturates	0.5	0.5	0.2 *	0.1	0.2
	Females				
Pain-killers/analgesics	4.7	4.6	3.0	2.4	3.1
Tranquillisers/sleeping pills	1.5	2.2	1.1	0.5	1.0
Steroids	0.2 *	0.1 *	0.1 *	0.1	0.1
Barbiturates	0.2 *	0.2 *	0.2	0.1	0.1
	Persons				
Pain-killers/analgesics	3.5	4.4	3.0	2.6	3.1
Tranquillisers/sleeping pills	1.5	2.6	1.2	0.5	1.1
Steroids	0.2 *	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.2
Barbiturates	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.2

Frequency of use of prescription drugs for non-medical purposes

The frequency at which the 598,200 recent users of prescription drugs for non-medical purposes used these drugs differed by sex and age (Table 8.3):

- One-quarter (25.5%) used one drug or more daily or weekly.
- When comparing all age groups, those aged 40 years and over had the highest proportion of recent users who used every day or every week.

Table 8.3: Frequency of prescription drugs for non-medical purposes use, recent users aged 14 years and over, by age, by sex, Australia, 2001

Frequency	Age group				Sex		Persons
	14–19	20–29	30–39	40+	Males	Females	
				(per cent)			
Daily or weekly	24.0	20.9	19.7	32.1	23.4	27.5	25.5
About once a month	28.0	18.2	24.9	23.6	21.6	24.3	23.0
Every few months	23.2	28.1	22.8	26.0	25.0	26.2	25.6
Once or twice a year	24.8	32.7	32.6	18.3	30.0	21.9	26.0

Note: Base equals recent users.

Source of supply of prescription drugs for non-medical purposes

Recent users were asked to indicate where they usually obtained prescription drugs for non-medical purposes:

- People who had used pain-killers in the last 12 months were most likely to obtain them from a shop/retail outlet (67.7%).
- 'Friend or acquaintance' was the most commonly named source of supply for recent users of tranquillisers (44.4%). One in 10 recent users of tranquillisers obtained this drug from doctor shopping or forged scripts.
- Recent users of steroids most commonly obtained this drug at gyms, sporting clubs or fitness centres (32.1%).
- For those who had used barbiturates in the last 12 months, the most common source of supply was a friend or acquaintance (51.5%).

Usual place of use of prescription drugs for non-medical purposes

Recent users were asked to indicate the locations they usually used prescription drugs for non-medical purposes:

- Recent users of pain-killers typically used them in their own home (94.4%). The next most common places of use were at a friend's house (11.7%) and in the workplace (11.3%).
- Similarly, recent users of tranquillisers were most likely to use them in their own home (86.3%) or at a friend's house (24.8%).
- At a friend's house was the most commonly cited location for use by recent users of steroids (17.1%).
- Two-thirds of recent users of barbiturates for non-medical purposes used at a friend's house (66.6%) or in their own home (64.3%).

Concurrent drug use with prescription drugs used for non-medical purposes

Recent users of prescription drugs were asked if any other drugs were used (on at least one occasion) at the same time as prescription drugs:

- Alcohol and marijuana/cannabis were most commonly used at the same time as prescription drugs for non-medical purposes, by recent users.
- All recent users of pain-killers, barbiturates and steroids indicated that they had used at least one other drug at the same time. However, 16.4% of recent users of tranquillisers used this drug alone.

Substitution of other drugs for prescription drugs used for non-medical purposes

Recent users of prescription drugs for non-medical purposes were asked if they had used another drug when prescription drugs were not available:

- Recent users of pain-killers for non-medical purposes most commonly used alcohol (49.5%), followed by marijuana/cannabis (31.8%) when pain-killers were not available. This pattern was also true for people who used tranquillisers or barbiturates in the last 12 months.
- When steroids were not available, recent users of steroids most commonly did not substitute another drug for steroids (73.3%).