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More adults, fewer young kids on ADHD drugs

FDA panel to review links to heart problems, hallucinations

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WASHINGTON - Use of attention deficit drugs rose nearly 19 percent among ages 20 to 44 in 2005 while falling 5 percent in children under 10, according to statistics released on Tuesday amid a U.S. review of the drugs' safety.

An estimated 1.7 million U.S. adults aged 20 to 64 and nearly 3.3 million children 19 and younger took a prescription drug to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in 2005, according to a report from pharmacy benefits manager Medco Health Solutions Inc..

ADHD drugs include Novartis AG's Ritalin and Focalin, Shire Plc's Adderall and Johnson & Johnson's Concerta.

The biggest jump in use — a 19 percent rise from 2004 — was among adults ages 20 to 44, the study said. The number of those aged 10 to 19 who took the drugs rose by 2 percent.

Use fell 5 percent for children under 10. The findings were based on prescription data from 2.5 million U.S. patients.

Critics say ADHD drugs are overprescribed, especially among children. The safety of the medicines has faced growing scrutiny in recent months.

In February, a Food and Drug Administration advisory panel called for a strong "black-box" warning on ADHD medicines, saying they might increase the chances of cardiovascular problems in some patients. The FDA says it does not yet know if reports of sudden deaths, heart attacks and strokes are related to the drugs.

On Wednesday, a different FDA advisory panel is set to review data on a possible link between ADHD therapies and heart problems, as well as psychiatric problems such as hallucinations, psychosis or mania in children.

Documents released in preparations for the advisory panel show that the adverse events, particularly hallucinations, can occur in some patients at normal doses of any ADHD drug. The reviews included roughly 90 studies of the drugs as well as reports from doctors, parents and others.

FDA officials say patients and doctors should be aware that the small number of events could represent side effects of the drugs, although they cannot point to a definitive link. However, they noted a "complete absence" of similar reports in children treated with dummy pills during dozens of clinical trials of the drugs. And in many children, the events ceased once they stopped taking the drugs — and resumed if they restarted.

"The predominance in young children of hallucinations, both visual and tactile, involving insects, snakes and worms is striking, and deserves further evaluation," FDA officials said in a March 3 memorandum included in the briefing documents.

The FDA will consider the input from the panels before deciding whether to update warnings on the drug labels.

Reuters and the Associated Press contributed to this report.

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