



Rx Drug Abuse & Other High School Health Risks (2011)

One in seven high school students (14%) in Rhode Island (RI) abuses prescription (Rx) drugs.¹ This Brief examines if these students are in greater jeopardy from other risk behaviors than their non-abusing peers (Chart 1), and whether those risks have improved or worsened over time (Chart 2). Twenty measures are evaluated,² comprising seven areas of vulnerability (drugs and alcohol, injury, mental health, sex, tobacco, violence, and weight). The findings are intended to inform interested parties and stimulate further research.

In this analysis, the relationship between Rx abuse and other risk factors is one of association, not causation (e.g., students who abuse Rx drugs are six times more likely to drive after drinking, but abusing Rx drugs cannot be said to cause drinking and driving). In the text, only those differences in values (over time or between abusing and non-abusing students) that are statistically 'significant' at the 95% confidence level are noted.³ Lastly, with the exception of the 'lesbian, gay or bisexual' measure, all others are unfavorable indicators, so lower/declining values are preferred.

Drugs & Alcohol: Marijuana use is over three times higher among abusing students (67% vs. 20%), and their marijuana use increased from 2007 (55% to 67%). Abusing students are also three times more likely to drink alcohol (75% vs. 28%).

Injury: Students who abuse Rx drugs are six times more likely to drink and drive (23% vs. 4%). They are also more likely to not wear seat belts (26% vs. 8%), or bike helmets (89% vs. 75%).

Mental Health: Emotional disability is twice as common among abusing high schoolers (29% vs. 13%). They are also twice as likely to suffer from depression (44% vs. 21%), and three times more likely to attempt suicide (22% vs. 7%).

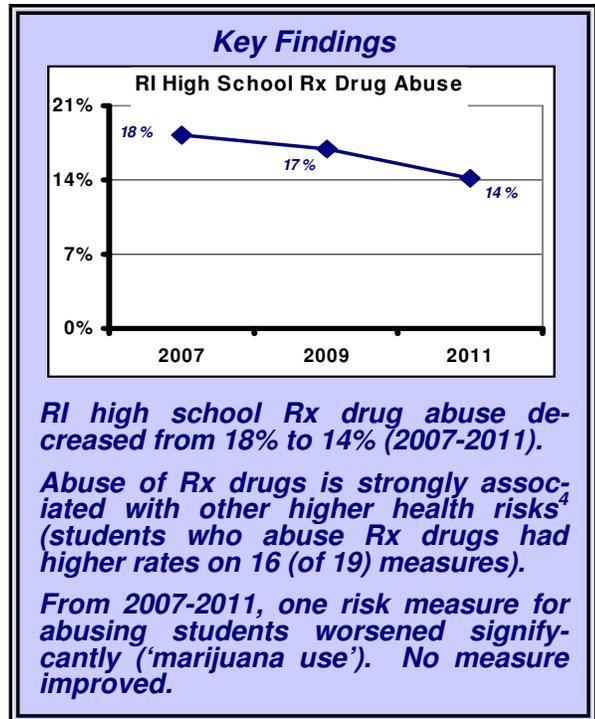
Sex: Students who abuse Rx drugs are three times more likely to identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual (17% vs. 6%). Sexual activity is two times greater for abusing students (58% vs. 26%), as is unprotected sex (10% vs. 4%).

Tobacco: Cigarette smoking is six times higher among abusing high schoolers (44% vs. 7%), and they are more likely to be heavy smokers (6% vs. 0%). The use of any tobacco product (cigarettes, cigars, snuff, pipes, chew, etc.) is also four times higher for this group (56% vs. 13%).

Violence: Students who abuse Rx drugs are twice as likely to fight (47% vs. 20%), three times more likely to experience dating violence (20% vs. 6%), and four times more likely to be victims of rape (19% vs. 5%).

Weight: Rates of obesity, lack of exercise and poor nutrition are not significantly different for abusing and non-abusing students.

One in seven RI high schoolers abuses prescription drugs, which is strongly correlated with other higher health risks.⁴ Many students mistakenly believe that abuse of medicines is less dangerous than that of illegal street drugs, and many parents are unaware of the other risk behaviors more common among these teens. Further education and intervention are necessary to confront these problems and address the associated risk disparities.



¹ Students self-reported if they had ever taken an Rx drug without a prescription (2007 and 2009 surveys asked about Rx painkiller abuse only).
² Data are from RI's Youth Risk Behavior Survey, part of a biennial national survey of high school students on the major causes of disease and injury morbidity and mortality. For more information contact Bruce Cryan, 401-222-5111, www.health.ri.gov/data/youthriskbehaviorsurvey/.
³ As the RI-YRBS is a sample survey, if the 95% Confidence Intervals of two values do not overlap, one may conclude (with 95% certainty) there was a 'real' difference between the two values (i.e., the difference was not likely due to sampling bias).
⁴ The Phi Coefficient (r_{ϕ}) measuring the correlation of Rx abuse and other higher health risks is 0.853 ('0' is no correlation & '1' is perfect correlation).

Chart 1: RI 2011 High School Health Risks by Rx Drug Abuse

(* statistically significant differences)

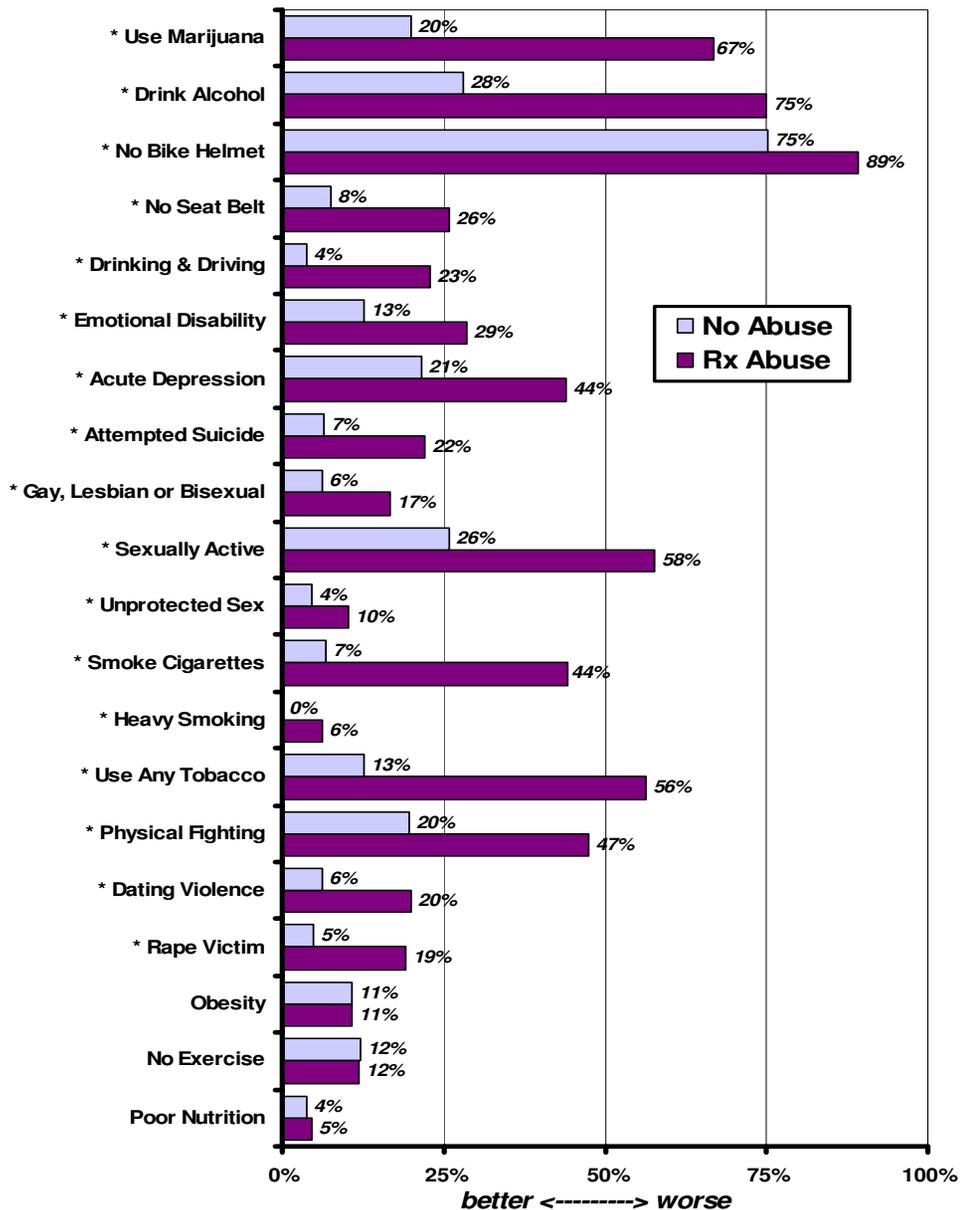
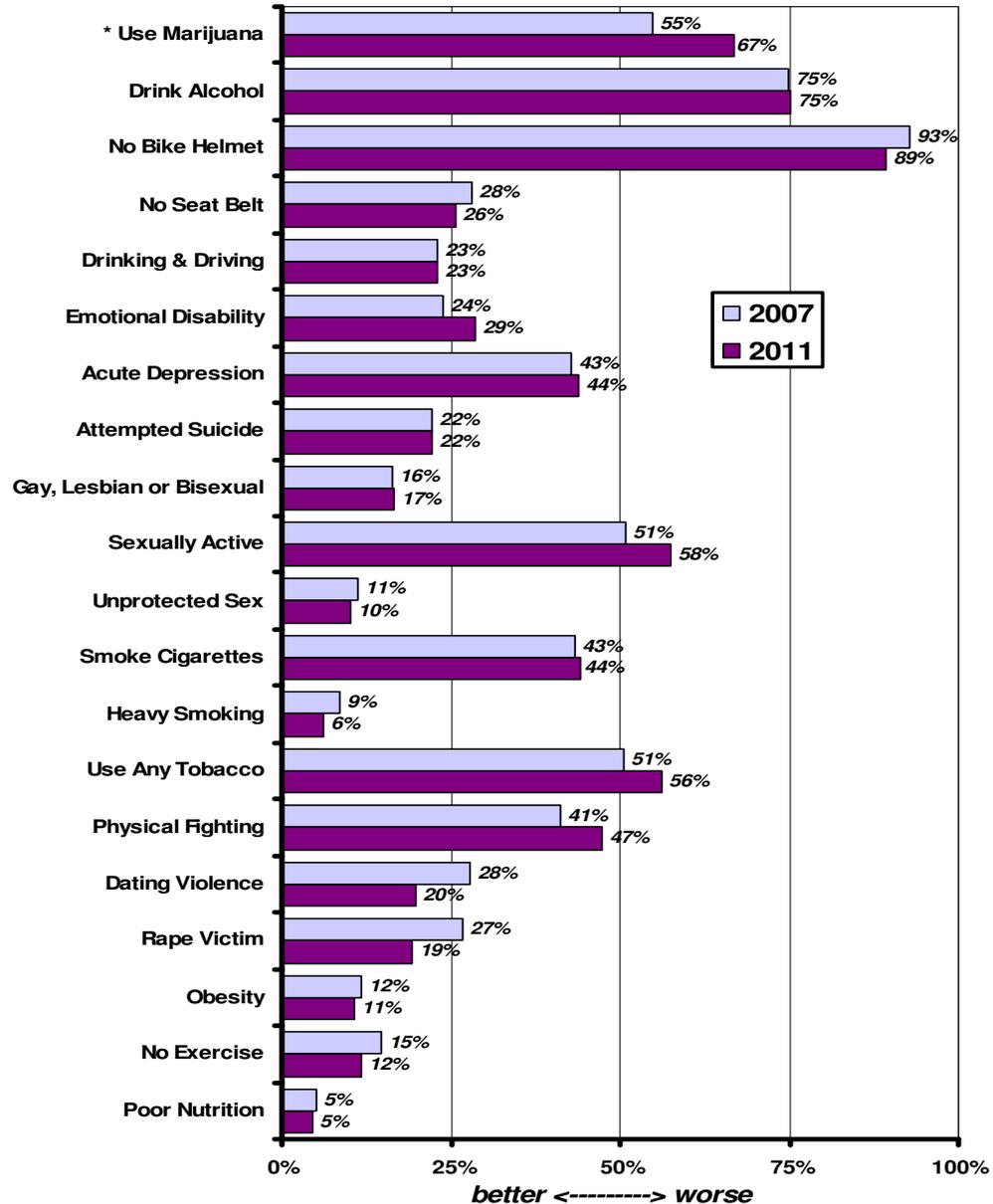


Chart 2: RI 2007 & 2011 Health Risks for Rx Abusing Students

(* statistically significant changes)



DRUGS & ALCOHOL MEASURES: *Use Marijuana* (1+ times, past mo.); *Drink Alcohol* (1+ days, past mo.); **INJURY MEASURES:** *No Bike Helmet* (never or rarely wore, past yr.); *No Seat Belt* (never or rarely wore, past yr.); *Drinking & Driving* (1+ times, past mo.); **MENTAL HEALTH MEASURES:** *Emotional Disability* (for 6+ mos.); *Acute Depression* (for 2+ weeks, past yr.); *Attempted Suicide* (1+ times, past yr.); **SEX MEASURES:** *Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual* (sexual self-identity); *Sexually Active* (1+ partner, past 3 mos.); *Unprotected Sex* (no protection, last encounter); **TOBACCO MEASURES:** *Smoke Cigarettes* (on 1+ days, past mo.); *Heavy Smoking* (over 10 cigarettes per day, past mo.); *Use Any Tobacco* (used chewing tobacco, snuff, dip, or smoked cigars or cigarettes on 1+ days, past mo.); **VIOLENCE MEASURES:** *Physical Fighting* (1+ times, past yr.); *Dating Violence* (physically abused by partner in the past yr.); *Rape Victim* (forced into sexual intercourse, ever); **WEIGHT MEASURES:** *Obesity* (over the 95th percentile for body mass index); *No Exercise* (60+ min. of exercise on 0 days, past wk.); *Poor Nutrition* (no fruit or vegetables, past wk.)