Docs Often Prescribe the Wrong Meds for Kids With ADHD

July 8, 2015

After looking at psychiatric prescription data across the United States, researchers at Columbia and Yale University have uncovered a troubling pattern of doctors prescribing antipsychotic drugs for kids diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, according to findings published in JAMA Psychiatry and reported by NBC News.

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a common behavioral disorder. Among school-age children, boys are more likely than girls to be diagnosed with the condition.

Antipsychotic drugs, which include popular mental health meds such as Clozaril (clozapine) and Zyprexa (olanzapine), are meant to be prescribed to people with conditions such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. But the JAMA report showed that 60 percent of children prescribed antipsychotic drugs in the United States didn't get a psychiatric diagnosis with their prescription. What's more, among the 40 percent of kids who did receive a psych evaluation, the most common diagnosis was ADHD.

That's a big issue, said researchers because the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) hasn't approved the use of antipsychotics for ADHD. The report also noted that "behavioral issues" associated with ADHD are much better handled with psychotherapy, behavioral therapy and stimulant drugs—such as Ritalin (methylphenidate)—rather than powerful antipsychotic drugs.

In addition, the findings showed around 1.5 percent of boys ages 10 to 18 are taking antipsychotics. "The real issue is, aren't there better ways to help them?" said Michael Schoenbaum, PhD, of the National Institute for Mental Health, who worked on the study.

Antipsychotics, when prescribed correctly, can help save lives. But these powerful drugs also come with a lot of health risks that include severe weight gain, metabolic disorders such as diabetes and changes in childhood brain development. For more information, click here.

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