University is hard work. From managing your classes, to holding down a casual or part-time job to trying to find time to socialise and date, it’s hard to find the time to fit everything in.

So, it’s not hard to see why everyone would love a magic pill that promises to help you stay on top of your game while boosting your concentration and focus.

While study drugs promise to be this magic pill for students, they unfortunately fall very short of this promise.

What are study drugs?

Study drugs are prescription stimulants that are misused by students to help them focus, stay awake or avoid procrastination. Most of these medications are approved for the treatment of attention-hyperactivity/deficit disorder or ADHD. When these drugs are misused, they can cause an array of dangerous side-effects, including addiction.

The reason they work for people with ADHD is because they are used to correct a chemical imbalance in the brain, similar to the way insulin is used to treat diabetes.

Any claims that they improve cognitive function in healthy people are very weak. They may help mask symptoms of fatigue, but they can’t make you more intelligent, and the only thing that can stop you procrastinating is you.

There are also multiple legal and health risks involved with study drugs.

Legal risks

It is unlawful to possess prescribed medication that has not been dispensed for you on a prescription. It is also illegal to give or sell prescription medication to anyone else, and you could be held responsible if someone is harmed by taking drugs you give or sell them.

A criminal record could also impact your place in your program and the chances of you getting a job in the future or being able to travel overseas.

Health risks

Aside from the legal risks, there are huge health concerns relating to the misuse of prescribed medication including a link to cardiovascular system failure.

Other short-term side effects are related to:
• hostility or paranoia
• irregular or increased heartbeat and palpitations
• increased blood pressure and respiration
• dry mouth, dilated pupils, nausea and headaches

Long-term regular use may lead to:
• rapid heartbeat and high blood pressure
• skin disorders and stomach ulcers
• malnutrition and vitamin deficiency
• mental health problems
• dizziness and difficulty breathing
• convulsions, coma, and even death.

Some users report not being able to control where they focus their attention after taking the drug. This means instead of getting that extra study in, you could end up rearranging your wardrobe for four hours.

What’s a better way to stay focused?

Here are four low risk ways to boost your performance long-term:

Sleep Smart
Aim to get 7-9 hours of sleep a night. If you can’t manage that, try to keep a regular sleep pattern, go to sleep and wake up at the same time, even on weekends. Evidence shows that as long we maintain our sleep rhythms we can continue to perform optimally. Check out this useful Mind Smart Guide for tips on sleep.

Eat well
The Mediterranean diet is rich in ‘brain foods’ shown to boost brain health. You should limit snacking on sugary foods and drinks to avoid sugar crashes.

Get Active
Studies have shown a significant association between physical activity levels, cognition and academic performance. Even when you can’t get out much, staying active boosts our mental and physical wellbeing. Check out our tips top staying active at home.

Be Mindful
Brief, daily meditation has been shown to enhance attention and memory. Listen to some useful tips from UNSW’s resident mindfulness expert, Laura.

Taken on too much?

If you are a domestic student and you are really struggling with your course load, it might be a good idea to reduce it for a term, so that you can get back on top of things. You can do as little as six courses across the year and still be considered a full-time student and retain all your full-time benefits.

University is important but your health and wellbeing is more important and unfortunately there is no magic pill. The best thing you can do is create a plan and prioritise your time so you can find balance.

Need help?

Our Student Support Advisors and International Student Experience Advisors are here to help.
Want more info?

For more information on Study Drugs check out the Alcohol and Drug Foundation