



OSAM-O-GRAM

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DATELINE: Columbus, Ohio



Wright State University
The University of Akron

Ultracet®/Ultram® Abuse Among College-Age Youth in the Columbus Area

Findings from June 2003 OSAM meeting indicate that prevention programs focusing on the abuse of Ultram® (tramadol), Ultracet® (tramadol & acetaminophen) and other pharmaceutical opioids are urgently needed. Tramadol is a centrally acting analgesic that is used to relieve moderate to moderately severe pain. Ultram® was approved by the FDA in 1995, and Ultracet® in 2001. Typically, Ultram® and Ultracet® are administered in doses of two tablets, up to a maximum daily dosage of eight tablets.

The OSAM Network began receiving sporadic reports of tramadol abuse in January 2000. January 2003 reports provided more evidence of increasing abuse of Ultram® and Ultracet® in the Columbus area. This new phenomenon was observed among drug-involved college-age youth, a population of potential trend-setters. To further investigate this emerging trend, Regional Epidemiologists in the Columbus area interviewed nine individuals with a history of Ultram® and/or Ultracet® abuse. All were white and 18-23 years of age. Eight of them were male, and all but one was a college student. Four of the participants reported abusing Ultracet®, three reported abusing Ultram®, and two had abused both Ultram® and Ultracet®.

The participants reported using alcohol, marijuana and in many cases Vicodin® (hydrocodone) or other prescription opioids before their initiation to tramadol. Typically, participants were introduced to the drug at social settings by friends who offered tramadol tablets to them. Usually, individuals swallow several tablets at once or crushed them and administer the drug intranasally. Tramadol is almost always taken in conjunction with alcohol and sometimes marijuana to enhance the intoxicating effects of the drugs. For example, a 19-year-old male college student commented:

I ate four [Ultram tablets] probably around eight all at once, and then drank a couple beers, and then I ate three more, and then I smoked a lot of pot... celebrating a successful economics midterm....

In most cases participants reported being able to obtain the drug free of charge or for about \$1 per tablet. Typically, Ultram® and Ultracet® were considered inexpensive and easily available alternatives to Vicodin® or other more potent pharmaceutical opioids. The majority of participants considered tramadol a casual drug with mild relaxing effects, and they perceived the drug to be very low risk. For example, another 19-year-old male college student explained:

I think it's fine [to take Ultram]... I mean when I get drunk I get a lot more disoriented than when I'm taking Ultrams or Vics [Vicodin]. I mean in my mind that's more just like, you know, a quick relaxer. I'm not thinking of it as the pain pill that the doctor prescribes and that you're not supposed to take too many of them with alcohol. That doesn't go through my mind.

At this time, abuse of tramadol does not appear to be widespread. Of 57 participants involved in a Club Drug Study conducted by Wright State University in Columbus, only six individuals (10.5%) reported ever using Ultram® or Ultracet®. Nevertheless, tramadol abuse is consistent with continuing reports of prescription opioid abuse across the state.

OSAM-O-GRAMS report key findings of the Ohio Substance Abuse Monitoring (OSAM) Network. Informants located throughout the state use qualitative and quantitative data to provide semiannual monitoring of substance abuse trends. The OSAM Network is funded by the Ohio Department of Alcohol and Drug Addiction Services by contract to Wright State University and by subcontract to the University of Akron. This OSAM-O-GRAM is based on the June 2003 OSAM Network meeting.

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