

## **The use of non-prescribed psychotropic drugs among students: from gender differences to reasons for use**

Marina Baroni<sup>1,2</sup>, Silvia Biagioni<sup>1,2</sup>, Marco Scalese<sup>2</sup>, Elisa Benedetti<sup>2</sup>, Sonia Cerrai<sup>2</sup>, Lorenzo Nelli<sup>2</sup>, Corrado Fizzarotti<sup>2</sup> & Sabrina Molinaro<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>: Department of Surgical, Medical and Molecular Pathology and Critical Care Medicine, University of Pisa, Pisa, Italy

<sup>2</sup>: Institute of Clinical Physiology, National Research Council of Italy, Rome, Italy

**Background:** Using pharmaceutical drugs without a medical prescription (PDWMP) is a growing public health problem. Mainly, this phenomenon seems to affect adolescents, thus making it necessary to investigate this age group.

**Aims:** Objectives: the study aims to observe PDWMP consumption patterns among high school students, with particular attention to potential gender differences. The work investigates potential risk factors related to the phenomenon, e.g. use of illegal psychoactive substances, Internet use, and gambling.

**Methods:** data were collected through the ESPAD Italia<sup>®</sup>2022 survey study among a representative sample of 12,406 Italian students between 15-19 years old. Descriptive statistical analysis and bivariate logistic regressions were performed.

**Results:** in 2022, 10,8% of students used PDWMP. The phenomenon is more prevalent among girls and the main motivations for use were the need to improve school performance and to feel better about themselves. Bivariate regression analysis revealed several significant associations, mainly regarding illegal psychoactive substance use and gambling. Notably, results showed several associations between the use of PDWMP and Internet engagement (e.g., cyberbullying) among girls compared to boys. Moreover, results also highlighted the potential protective role of psycho-social factors (e.g., being satisfied with relationships with parents or friends) in contrasting PDWMP use.

### **Conclusion:**

The results showed important gender differences in the factors associated with PDWMP use. A strong protective value of the psychosocial environment emerged. In conclusion, the need emerged to develop prevention strategies targeting gender differences taking into consideration the findings on the associated factors in terms of psychoactive substance use, gambling, and Internet engagement to structure effective intervention programs.