

School and public health officials may be significantly underestimating the public health impact of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, according to a survey conducted in Johnston County. Scientists from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, a division of the National Institute of Health, and the University's School of Medicine performed the study of several thousand children.

The NIEHS released the results of a federal study of the incidence of ADHD Tuesday. They reported that more than 10 percent of boys and about 5 percent of girls in elementary schools were being treated for ADHD. These results are notably higher than those reported in the American Psychiatric Manual, which estimates that 3 to 5 percent of children in elementary school are treated for ADHD nationally.

“Asking the parents about diagnosis rates was a key to finding the higher figures, because school nurses who usually report the numbers might not be aware of children who are receiving medication treatment entirely at home,” remarked Albert J. “Jack” Naftel, M.D., co-author of the study and member of the department of psychiatry at the School of Medicine.

Treatment rates for white children were reported to be higher than those for blacks. White grade school boys had a treatment rate of 11 percent, while black boys were treated at a rate of 7 percent. White girls were treated at a rate of 6 percent, while only 3 percent of black girls were treated for ADHD.

“This is one aspect of the study that we should pay special attention to. We need to determine the reason for the difference and what it means for the children in our educational system,” said Mary C. LaScala, an ADHD expert from Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools.

Parental and teacher reports of 6,099 children in grades one through five in 17 public elementary schools in Johnston County were utilized for the study. The authors of the study feel that medication rates in the county are an accurate representation of those throughout the state and the country because its ethnic and educational profile is similar to those larger geographic regions.

The superintendent of Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools, Neil Pedersen, proposed that school administrators make the most of the study. He wants them to learn more about ADHD and how it affects children.

ADHD is a behavioral syndrome that is most often developed during early childhood. Symptoms of the syndrome include inattention and distractibility, restlessness, inability to sit still and difficulty concentrating on one thing for any period of time.

The NIEHS has been located at 111 Alexander Drive in Research Triangle Park since 1967.