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**A third of teenagers say they have been prescribed antidepressants,
new survey finds**

*GP's under pressure to prescribe antidepressants to teens who are
unable to access psychological treatments on the NHS*

- Dr Nihara Krause, consultant clinical psychologist, and CEO of youth mental health charity stem4, comments: "This survey would suggest we are probably heading towards a deepening mental health crisis which will require more extensive intervention in the long term."
- CAMHS psychiatrist in the South East of England advised a GP: "Oh, they hardly ever end up killing themselves... Just manage in primary care."

A lack of access to effective psychological therapies has led to over-prescription of antidepressants for children and young people, according to the alarming findings of a new survey by mental health charity stem4. Its insights were shared exclusively today with ITV's Good Morning Britain (GMB).

More than a third (37%) of 12-to-18 year-olds now claim to have been prescribed antidepressants to treat depression or other mental health conditions at some point during their short lives, rising to 43% among 19-to-21 year-olds.

Despite current guidelines from the [National Institute for Health and Care Excellence](#) (NICE), which state that "Fluoxetine (the only antidepressant for children and adolescents where the benefits outweigh the risks) should only be prescribed to children and young people following an assessment and diagnosis by a child and adolescent psychiatrist," more than one in ten (13%) 12-to-18 year-olds say they have been prescribed antidepressants by their GP, and without having been assessed or diagnosed by NHS Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Only 7% of teenagers have been prescribed antidepressants directly by a child and adolescent psychiatrist or CAMHS healthcare professional. Meanwhile, 17% say they were prescribed antidepressants by their GP, having seen a child and adolescent psychiatrist, and/or CAMHS services. Amongst those aged 12 - 18 who have been prescribed antidepressants by their GP, almost half (49%) said they were given a prescription within their first two GP visits.

In stem4's survey of 2,007 young people between the ages of 12 and 21, one in four (42%) 12-to-18 year-olds say they are currently experiencing mental health difficulties such as depression, anxiety, eating disorders and self-harming behaviours. Of that 42%, just over a quarter have been able to access some form of treatment.

In another recent survey carried out by stem4, which polled 1,001 GPs, half of the doctors reported that overstretched NHS CAMHS services are now rejecting 60-100% of all referrals for moderate to severe depression and anxiety disorders in young people. GPs are being told that their patients are not sick enough to warrant specialist treatment.

GPs are also finding themselves under increasing pressure to go against NICE guidelines and prescribe antidepressants to under-18s, either because their young patients are being refused access to NHS CAMHS services and psychological interventions, or because they are stuck on long NHS CAMHS waiting lists.



One young person told the survey: *"I was diagnosed with depression over the phone where they prescribed me with antidepressants. This is wrong, and everyone should be able to access counselling."* Another added: *"In the past six months my cousin took his life at the age of 22. He asked for help but did not get it."*

According to one GP, who had unsuccessfully tried to refer a suicidal teenager to CAMHS in the South East of England, the CAMHS consultant psychiatrist advised: *"Oh, they hardly ever end up killing themselves... Just manage in primary care."* Meanwhile, a CAMHS service in the North West of England, having rejected a self-harming teen for psychological therapy, told the GP to instead consider starting the patient on antidepressants (SSRI).

A GP from the East of England told the survey: *"CAMHS are completely overwhelmed. Even when a referral is accepted, they rely on primary care to prescribe and follow up whilst patients are waiting for treatment. The waiting lists for treatment are far too long."*

In Scotland, another GP described the situation as *"Terrible, horrific, and heart-breaking. Diagnosis is done by mental health nurses, inappropriate medications started in HUGE doses, lots of use of benzodiazepines and antidepressants (SSRIs). I am finding it unbearable to watch these young lives being destroyed and there is literally nothing I can do, and I've tried. There is no access to psychology."*

Dr Nihara Krause, consultant clinical psychologist, and CEO and founder of youth mental health charity stem4, commented:

"Antidepressants, such as SSRI's, can be effective in treating depression and other mental health conditions under assessment and guidance of a specialist. But when prescribed as a replacement for a psychological intervention – and not as part of a combination of therapy – they just mask the mental health difficulties young people are experiencing. Untreated psychological conditions are disabling and can impact on all elements of a child's or young person's functioning, including education. Those young patients who have been unable to access treatments and have only been prescribed antidepressants are likely to face still more anguish when trying to come off them. This survey would suggest we are probably heading towards a deepening mental health crisis which will require more extensive intervention in the long term.

"The NHS is treating more young people with mental health difficulties than ever before, but if only half of young people who ask for help are able to access effective psychological treatments, then our ambitions aren't big enough.

"What we need is meaningful investment in secondary care and access to effective mental health support in every school, college and university across the UK as well as specialist mental health practitioners supporting primary care providers. The young people in this survey have told us they want direct access to one-to-one mental health support in schools and the local community. They want to be able to self-refer, and talk anonymously and confidentially with people who care and can help."

- Ends -

Notes to editors

Contact

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About the survey

Young people's survey

Survey of 2,007 regionally representative young people aged from 12 to 21 carried out Survey Goo between 15th to 19th July 2022

GP survey

Survey of 1,001 regionally representative GPs across the UK carried out by MedeConnect Healthcare Insight between 4 March and 1 April 2022.

Current guidelines from the [National Institute for Health and Care Excellence \(NICE\)](#)

Fluoxetine (Prozac), the only antidepressant where the benefits outweigh the risks, should only be prescribed to children and young people following an assessment and diagnosis by a child and adolescent psychiatrist. It should not be offered except in combination with a concurrent psychological intervention. Weekly monitoring by a healthcare professional should be considered in the first four weeks, to monitor for adverse effects, including suicidal behaviour, which has been linked with the use of antidepressants, particularly in children and young people.

About stem4

stem4 is an award-winning charity that supports teenagers with their mental health. It provides evidence-based education, builds resilience, enhances motivation to change, and provides signposts to ensure early intervention and action. stem4 focuses on commonly occurring mental health issues in teenagers including eating disorders, anxiety, depression, self-harm and addiction.

The charity works with students, parents and teachers in secondary schools and colleges, and with health professionals such as GPs and school nurses through its conference programme and through digitally delivered workshops suitable for PHSE in schools. **stem4** is also included in the Royal College of GP toolkit.

■ stem4's free, evidence-based, smartphone apps

With children and young people experiencing difficulty and long waiting times in accessing effective treatments, **stem4** has developed four NHS-approved smartphone apps, all based on evidence-based strategies, to help young people in the treatment of and recovery from their mental health difficulties. These apps have been downloaded and used over 2 million times. These apps include

- **Clear Fear**, which uses the evidence-based treatment Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) to help manage the symptoms of anxiety;
- **Calm Harm**, which uses the basic principles of an evidence-based therapy, Dialectic Behaviour Therapy (DBT) to help manage the urge to self-harm;
- **Move Mood**, which uses Behavioural Activation Therapy to help improve low mood and manage the symptoms of depression.
- **Combined Minds**, which uses a Strengths-Based approach that has been shown to be effective in recovery, providing practical strategies for families and friends to support teenage mental health;

www.stem4.org.uk