

Psychiatric Hospitalization Trends for Children 17 and Under

Children may be more likely to be hospitalized from September through May for psychiatric or substance abuse treatment. This finding comes from an analysis of both Medicaid and commercial accounts of managed behavioral health care company ValueOptions. The dataset of nearly 28,000 episodes of care included over 5,000 cases in the 17 and under age group.

“We want to alert parents and school officials to this trend for an increased risk of hospitalization during these months of the school year,” says Hal Levine, DO, chief medical officer for ValueOptions’ health plan division. “It is especially important for everyone who cares for a child or teen to be alert to signs of distress during this time.”

Although a review of the data narrows the *peak* months to October, November, March and May depending on the particular region of hospital care, increased awareness during the school months is advisable. Other statistically significant findings follow:

- The most frequent diagnoses are anxiety, stress and mood disorders.
- Boys and girls are admitted almost equally.
- Although the average length of stay for boys and girls is about a week, boys are likely to be hospitalized about one day longer than girls.

Watching for anxiety, stress and mood disorders

Since the substantial majority of children were admitted for anxiety, stress and mood disorders, it is important for parents, doctors, school staff and other adults to know the signs indicating a child’s potential need for mental health or behavioral support. Some general signs of distress follow, but this list is neither a diagnosis nor is it exhaustive. Any persistent changes noted in a child that cause alarm should be discussed with a doctor or mental health professional.

Physical symptoms associated with anxiety

- trembling
- muscle aches and soreness
- insomnia
- sweating
- abdominal upset
- dizziness

In order to meet the criteria of an anxiety disorder diagnosis, excessive worry must occur more days than not, and at least three of the following symptoms need to be present for at least six months:

- feeling keyed up, restless or on edge
- being easily fatigued
- difficulty concentrating or mind goes blank
- irritability



- muscle tension
- sleep disturbances (difficulty falling or staying asleep, or having restless, unsatisfying sleep)

Signs and symptoms of stress

In young children:

- bed wetting, compulsive crying, hair-pulling and nightmares
- more dependent or demanding of parent's time

In older children:

- difficulty concentrating, excessive TV watching, overeating and chronic sleepiness or insomnia
- complaining about vague physical problems, such as headaches and stomachaches unrelated to any particular illness

Signs and symptoms of depression

- persistent sadness and increased crying
- frequent physical complaints
- anxiety (separation anxiety or excessive anxiety about school performance)
- change in eating or sleeping patterns
- increase or decrease in weight
- poor school performance and/or frequent absences
- boredom, unable to concentrate or sluggish
- irritability
- aggression
- loss of interest in favorite activities
- poor peer relationships
- alcohol and drug use
- promiscuity
- recurrent thoughts of death or suicide, making suicide plans or suicide attempts

Seeking help

“If a child’s symptoms persist, a consultation with a licensed mental/behavioral health professional is beneficial,” explains Dr. Levine. “There are a variety of professionals who diagnose and treat childhood anxiety, stress and mood disorders, including child and adolescent psychiatrists, child psychologists, child social workers, family therapists and professional counselors.”

Most states have licenses for all these varied types of providers, so make sure this is the case with whomever you choose. Keep in mind, however, that just because someone is a licensed professional, it does not mean he or she is a child specialist. Be sure to ask.

About ValueOptions

Covering more than 24 million lives through a variety of direct contracts with health plans, employers, and state and county agencies, ValueOptions is a national managed care company that specializes in disease management for all mental health and chemical dependency diagnoses. ValueOptions supports the unique needs of client organizations with traditional managed care products and integrated behavioral healthcare services, as well as wellness and prevention initiatives and work-life programs. Leveraging a national behavioral health provider network of more than 70,000 practitioner locations, ValueOptions puts the clinical well-being of its members as its first and foremost priority. Visit www.valueoptions.com for more information.

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