

National trends in the prescribing of controlled drugs

Notes on data:

Data on prescribing is collected by [ePACT2](#) – an online application that provides authorised users with access to prescription data held by NHS Business Services Authority. For prescribing in the NHS, including hospitals and dental services, we have extracted data from this application for the years 2021, 2022 and 2023 to provide overall figures and trend analysis. For non-medical prescribing, the NHS Community Pharmacist Consultation Service, and requisitions and prescribing in independent primary care, the data for 2023 was supplied directly by NHS Business Services Authority.

In this report, we compare current data for 2023 with the data published in our report for 2022. There may be changes to overall figures for 2022, as ePACT2 may be updated over time.

Prescribing trends in primary care

In this section, we highlight trends of the most prescribed controlled drugs.

Overall prescribing of controlled drugs in Schedules 2 to 5 in 2023

Total controlled drug items prescribed by NHS primary care services:

73,830,666 items in 2023

73,880,442 items in 2022

(a small decrease of less than 0.5%)

The cost of this was £572,477,393 in 2023 compared with £547,248,678 in 2022 (an increase in cost of 5%) even though the number of items had decreased.

The most notable prescribing trends in NHS primary care in 2023 include:

- Continued increases in prescribing volumes of medicines that are licensed to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), such as dexamfetamine, lisdexamfetamine and methylphenidate. This trend is also echoed in NHS hospital prescribing for dispensing in the community, as well as in the private prescribing trends, which may reflect a lack of access to NHS care. Figure 14 shows the NHS hospital prescribing trends over the last 5 years.
- Similar to last year, an increase in testosterone prescribing, which could be linked to increased awareness of its use for women experiencing menopause.
- A reduction in prescribing of pholcodine (after [changes to clinical guidance and availability](#)), pethidine, co-proxamol, fentanyl and diamorphine. We have also seen reduced fentanyl patch prescribing in certain age groups.
- An increase in non-medical prescribing. Similar to last year, pharmacists account for over half of non-medical prescribing.
- A continued trend in reduced prescribing by NHS dentists, possibly linked to dental access issues.

Figure 2 shows overall prescribing levels in 2023 compared with the previous year.

Figure 2: Prescribing of controlled drugs by schedule in 2023

Schedule	Change	Total items prescribed in 2023	Total items prescribed in 2022
Schedule 2	up by 1%	9,345,681	9,226,618
Schedule 3	up by less than 0.5%	26,108,803	26,008,549
Schedule 4	down by less than 2%	12,844,589	13,062,052
Schedule 5	up by less than 0.5%	25,531,593	25,583,223

Of all prescribing of controlled drugs in primary care in 2023:

- **Schedule 2** accounted for 13%
- **Schedule 3** accounted for 35%
- **Schedule 4** accounted for 17%
- **Schedule 5** accounted for 35%

Patterns of prescribing in NHS primary care

Of the most prescribed controlled drugs in 2023, there was a **reduction in prescribing** for a number of controlled drugs compared with 2022 (figure 3).

Figure 3: Reductions in prescribing of controlled drugs in 2023

Controlled drug	Change	Total items prescribed in 2023	Total items prescribed in 2022
Pholcodine (Schedule 5)	down by 82%	5,744	31,264
Pethidine (Schedule 2)	down by 72%	2,035	7,157
Temazepam (Schedule 3)	down by 40%	335,122	555,427
Co-proxamol (Schedule 5)	down by 25%	5,078	6,728
Fentanyl (Schedule 2)	down by 8%	746,026	812,439
Diamorphine (Schedule 2)	down by 8%	8,279	8,979
Co-dydramol (Schedule 5)	down by 7%	1,324,448	1,426,820
Oxazepam (Schedule 4)	down by 7%	48,850	52,267

Controlled drug	Change	Total items prescribed in 2023	Total items prescribed in 2022
Phenobarbital (Schedule 3)	down by 5%	153,148	161,063
Methadone (Schedule 2)	down by 5%	1,697,505	1,785,152
Zopiclone (Schedule 4)	down by 4%	4,486,235	4,681,170
Diazepam (Schedule 4)	down by 3%	4,189,107	4,339,653
Dihydrocodeine (Schedule 5)	down by 3%	1,390,020	1,432,483

At the same time, of the most prescribed controlled drugs, there was an **increase in prescribing** in 2023, compared with 2022 (figure 4).

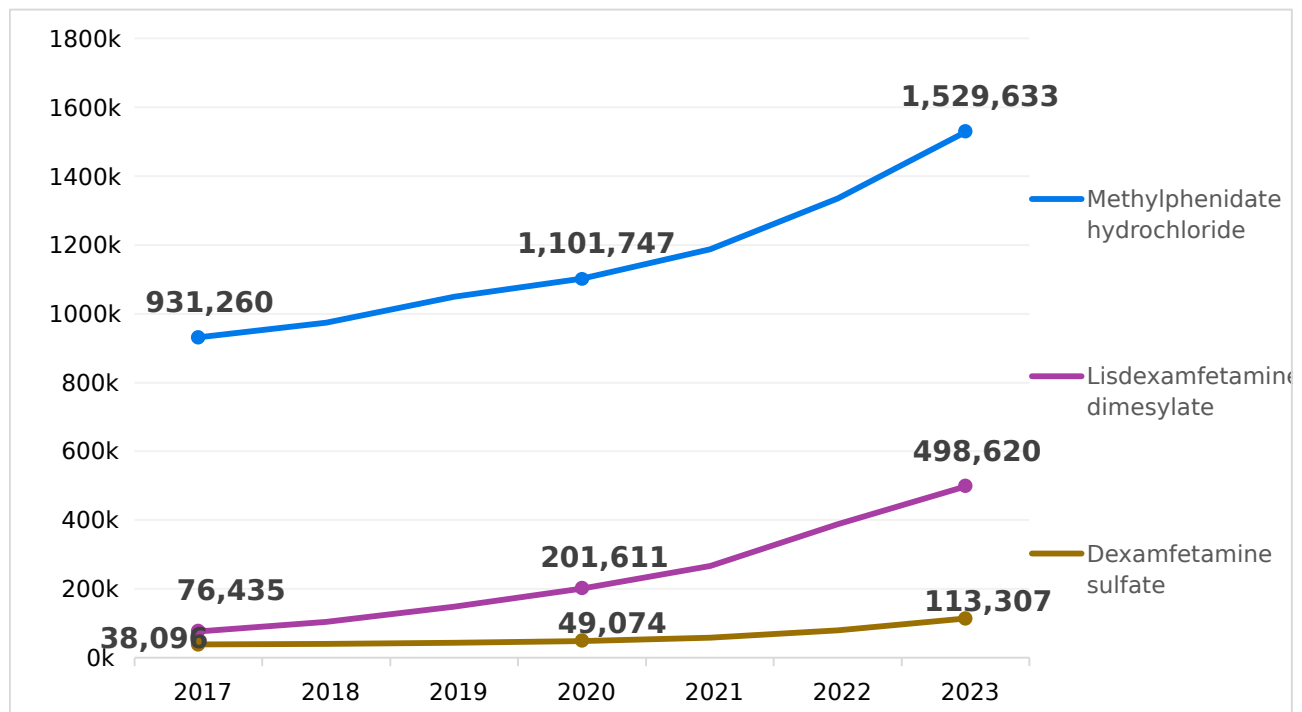
Figure 4: Increases in prescribing of controlled drugs in 2023

Controlled drug	Change	Total items prescribed in 2023	Total items prescribed in 2022
Dexamfetamine (Schedule 2)	up by 44%	113,307	78,824
Lisdexamfetamine (Schedule 2)	up by 29%	498,620	387,490
Testosterone (Schedule 4)	up by 15%	606,002	526,876
Methylphenidate (Schedule 2)	up by 15%	1,529,633	1,334,860
Zolpidem (Schedule 4)	up by 6%	625,656	591,436
Pregabalin (Schedule 3)	up by 5%	9,053,848	8,636,909
Midazolam (Schedule 3)	up by 3%	365,538	354,614
Buprenorphine (Schedule 3)	up by 3%	3,343,768	3,255,662

Looking at the proportions of controlled drugs in different schedules prescribed in 2023:

- pregabalin and gabapentin accounted for 63% of all Schedule 3 prescribing
- diazepam and zopiclone accounted for 68% of all Schedule 4 prescribing
- co-codamol accounted for 59% of all Schedule 5 prescribing
- methylphenidate, lisdexamfetamine and dexamfetamine accounted for 23% of all Schedule 2 prescribing (see figure 5)
- morphine sulfate accounted for 29% of all Schedule 2 prescribing

Figure 5: Number of items of methylphenidate, lisdexamfetamine and dexamfetamine prescribed in NHS primary care in England, 2017 to 2023



NHS non-medical prescribing

Overall prescribing of controlled drugs by non-medical prescribers (healthcare professionals other than a doctor or dentist) increased during 2023:

5,440,585 items prescribed in 2023

5,152,958 items prescribed in 2022

(an increase of 6%)

Figure 6: Non-medical prescribing of controlled drugs in 2023

Prescribed by	Change	Total items prescribed in 2023	Total items prescribed in 2022
Pharmacists	up by 10%	2,908,340	2,645,819
Nurses	up by 1%	2,524,854	2,499,873
Paramedics	down by 13%	5,116	5,897
Physiotherapists	up by 79%	2,098	1,171
Radiographers	up by 10%	111	101
Podiatrists	down by 35%	63	97

Prescribing by pharmacists accounted for 53% of all non-medical prescribing in 2023 (2,908,340 items) compared with 51% in 2022. Given the year-on-year increasing volume of non-medical prescribing, this year we provide some more detailed information about the range of controlled drugs being prescribed by pharmacists and nurses (figures 7 and 8).

Pharmacist prescribing

Figure 7 shows the controlled drugs prescribed by pharmacists at volumes in excess of 10,000 items during 2023.

Figure 7: Pharmacist prescribing of controlled drugs in 2023

Controlled drug	Change	Total items prescribed in 2023	Total items prescribed in 2022
Co-codamol (Schedule 5)	up by 10%	563,232	510,178
Pregabalin (Schedule 3)	up by 12%	401,398	357,374
Gabapentin (Schedule 3)	up by 10%	299,679	272,078
Tramadol (Schedule 3)	up by 6%	212,149	201,032
Codeine (Schedule 5)	up by 12%	195,183	174,538
Zopiclone (Schedule 4)	up by 7%	160,604	150,109

Controlled drug	Change	Total items prescribed in 2023	Total items prescribed in 2022
Diazepam (Schedule 4)	up by 7%	157,141	147,107
Buprenorphine (Schedule 3)	up by 12%	124,265	111,294
Morphine sulfate (Schedule 2)	up by 7%	112,692	105,097
Oxycodone (Schedule 2)	up by 12%	85,593	76,634
Methadone (Schedule 2)	up by 6%	70,092	66,392
Methylphenidate (Schedule 2)	up by 31%	57,770	44,141
Dihydrocodeine (Schedule 5)	up by 7%	56,920	53,276
Co-dydramol (Schedule 5)	up by less than 0.5%	51,554	51,469

Controlled drug	Change	Total items prescribed in 2023	Total items prescribed in 2022
Clonazepam (Schedule 4)	up by 12%	46,095	41,073
Lorazepam (Schedule 4)	up by 10%	40,195	36,668
Fentanyl (Schedule 2)	up by less than 0.5%	28,689	28,660
Lisdexamfetamine (Schedule 2)	up by 55%	25,625	16,538
Zolpidem (Schedule 4)	up by 12%	22,356	19,953
Clobazam (Schedule 4)	up by 12%	18,781	16,765
Testosterone (Schedule 4)	up by 46%	16,970	11,627
Nitrazepam (Schedule 4)	up by 6%	13,266	12,506
Temazepam (Schedule 3)	down by 38%	12,337	19,786

Nurse prescribing

Figure 8 shows controlled drugs that were prescribed by nurses at volumes in excess of 10,000 items during 2023. It is important to note that the high volume of items of methadone prescribed is likely to reflect nurses practising in services that offer opioid substitution therapy.

Figure 8: Nurse prescribing of controlled drugs

Controlled drug	Change	Total items prescribed in 2023	Total items prescribed in 2022
Methadone hydrochloride (Schedule 2)	down by 6%	536,072	568,063
Co-codamol (Schedule 5)	up by less than 0.5%	391,431	389,667
Buprenorphine (Schedule 3)	up by 5%	328,009	311,681
Pregabalin (Schedule 3)	up by 7%	181,212	169,410
Codeine (Schedule 5)	up by 3%	159,539	154,276

Controlled drug	Change	Total items prescribed in 2023	Total items prescribed in 2022
Gabapentin (Schedule 3)	up by 1%	151,814	150,254
Tramadol (Schedule 3)	down by 2%	113,710	115,994
Diazepam (Schedule 4)	down by 3%	103,938	106,974
Zopiclone (Schedule 4)	down by 1%	91,282	92,230
Morphine sulfate (Schedule 2)	up by 5%	77,796	74,411
Methylphenidate (Schedule 2)	up by 34%	57,536	42,845
Oxycodone (Schedule 2)	up by 3%	46,708	45,209
Dihydrocodeine (Schedule 5)	down by 5%	29,986	31,687

Controlled drug	Change	Total items prescribed in 2023	Total items prescribed in 2022
Lorazepam (Schedule 4)	up by 5%	28,182	26,853
Co-dydramol (Schedule 5)	down by 7%	25,404	27,205
Midazolam (Schedule 3)	up by 13%	25,210	22,242
Lisdexamfetamine (Schedule 2)	up by 28%	19,201	15,045
Clonazepam (Schedule 4)	up by 4%	17,929	17,251
Fentanyl (Schedule 2)	down by 5%	17,011	17,902
Zolpidem (Schedule 4)	up by 11%	11,468	10,357

We have also seen a range of controlled drugs prescribed by other non-medical prescribers. The vast majority of this appears to be consistent with the expected scope of practice of these healthcare professionals, such as paramedics and physiotherapists. However, we have noted several instances where medicines such as dexamfetamine, lisdexamfetamine and methylphenidate have been prescribed by healthcare professionals who are unlikely to have expertise in this specialist area.

Last year we looked at the importance of ensuring that non-medical prescribing is undertaken appropriately, including ensuring it is within the prescriber's scope of practice. Professional regulators all have expectations of their registrants and provide guidance for safe and effective prescribing. We also provide guidance on [supporting non-medical prescribers in primary care](#), and many elements of this are transferable to other settings.

NHS dental prescriptions for controlled drugs

Total controlled drug items prescribed by NHS dentists:

28,819 items in 2023

30,790 items in 2022

(a decrease of 6%)

Dentists working in the NHS can prescribe 3 controlled drugs on NHS dental prescription forms to patients:

Dihydrocodeine: as in previous years, this was the most prescribed medicine, accounting for 82% of total dental prescribing in 2023.

23,714 items prescribed in 2023

25,826 items prescribed in 2022

(a decrease of 8%)

Diazepam: Between 2022 and 2023 prescribing increased by 6%

Temazepam: Between 2022 and 2023, prescribing decreased by 14%

Reduced access to dental treatment continues to be a national issue. These patterns in decreased prescribing could be a result of this.

ePACT2 Opioid comparators dashboard

Last year, we looked at prescribing of opioids in a specific geographical area. When we looked at this data again, we found the number of patients receiving opioid pain medicines per 1,000 patients in early 2024 remained similar compared with the same period in 2023 (figure 9). Prescribing is still highest in the north of England, which reflects previous years.

Figure 9: Patients receiving opioid pain medicines by region in 2023 (12 April to 9 May 2023) and 2024 (29 February to 27 March 2024)

Region	Number of patients receiving opioid pain medicines	Number of patients receiving opioid pain medicines per 1,000 patients
London	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● 83,861 in 2024● 83,122 in 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● 8 in 2024● 8 in 2023

Region	Number of patients receiving opioid pain medicines	Number of patients receiving opioid pain medicines per 1,000 patients
South East	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 134,267 in 2024 ● 133,490 in 2023 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 14 in 2024 ● 14 in 2023
East of England	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 102,437 in 2024 ● 102,000 in 2023 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 14 in 2024 ● 14 in 2023
South West	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 110,312 in 2024 ● 109,434 in 2023 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 18 in 2024 ● 18 in 2023
Midlands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 221,329 in 2024 ● 219,778 in 2023 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 19 in 2024 ● 19 in 2023
North West	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 172,666 in 2024 ● 173,375 in 2023 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 22 in 2024 ● 22 in 2023

Region	Number of patients receiving opioid pain medicines	Number of patients receiving opioid pain medicines per 1,000 patients
North East and Yorkshire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 243,209 in 2024 ● 242,692 in 2023 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 26 in 2024 ● 27 in 2023

Full details about the dashboard specifications are on the [NHS Business Services Authority website](#).

We also looked at prescribing of 'high oral morphine equivalent' volume of opioid prescribing, in combination with other medicines, such as gabapentinoids, antidepressants and z-drugs (figure 10). The risk of harm increases substantially at doses above an oral morphine equivalent of 120mg/day, but there is no increased benefit. Risk can be increased further when this is prescribed alongside these other medicines.

Figure 10: High oral morphine equivalent prescribing with other medicines, 29 February to 27 March 2024

Medicines prescribed	Prescribed for 1 to 84 days	Prescribed for 85 to 168 days	Prescribed for 169 days or more
Patients receiving high oral morphine equivalent volume of opioids in combination with gabapentinoids	263	440	26,525
Patients receiving high oral morphine equivalent volume of opioids in combination with antidepressants	272	463	37,332
Patients receiving high oral morphine equivalent volume of opioids in combination with benzodiazepines	109	131	7,559

Medicines prescribed	Prescribed for 1 to 84 days	Prescribed for 85 to 168 days	Prescribed for 169 days or more
Patients receiving high oral morphine equivalent volume of opioids in combination with z-drugs	63	83	5,576

The dashboard provides a useful snapshot of data that prescribers and their teams can look at to help identify and manage higher risk prescribing. This data is available at practice level to support this work. Some academic health science networks have produced [useful webinars](#) on the functionality of the dashboard and also compiled a [range of resources](#) and [opioid deprescribing toolkits](#) that can help to support teams working to reduce the risk of harm from opioids.

Fentanyl patch prescribing

Last year we looked at how fentanyl patches are prescribed for older adults. We have followed up on this in 2023 (figure 11).

Figure 11: Fentanyl patch prescribing by age band

Age group	Change	Total items prescribed in 2023	Total items prescribed in 2022
0-59	down by 17%	261,825	313,611
60-69	down by 8%	162,134	176,841
70-79	down by 15%	144,266	169,966
80 and over	down by 19%	156,112	192,155

Total number of items prescribed:

- 727,614 total items prescribed in 2023 (including 3,277 with ages unknown)
- 856,722 total items prescribed in 2022 (including 4,149 with ages unknown)

Overall there has been a 15% decrease in the prescribing of fentanyl patches in 2023 compared with 2022 (prescribing reduced by 8% between 2021 and 2022). This year, the biggest year-on-year reduction in prescribing (19% reduction) was in the group aged 80 and over. Although it is not possible to tell if this reduced prescribing is specifically a result of deprescribing initiatives, it may be seen as a positive trend, given the importance of ensuring that prescribing of these medicines is clinically appropriate, especially on an extended basis in older adults.

Prescribing in NHS hospitals for community pharmacy dispensing

In 2023, hospital prescribing (on FP10HP prescription forms that can be dispensed in a community pharmacy) was also broadly in line with 2022 (figures 12 and 13).

Total controlled drug items across Schedules 2 to 5 prescribed in hospital using an FP10(HNC) or FP10SS form:

978,220 items in 2023

956,529 items in 2022

(an increase of 2%)

The cost of this was £16,420,698 in 2023 compared with £15,876,710 in 2022 (an increase of 3%)

Of all prescribing of controlled drugs in hospitals for dispensing in a community pharmacy:

- **Schedule 2** accounted for 51%
- **Schedule 3** accounted for 16%
- **Schedule 4** accounted for 20%
- **Schedule 5** accounted for 12%

Note: Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding

Figure 12: Key reductions in hospital prescribing of controlled drugs for community pharmacy dispensing in 2023

Controlled drug	Change	Total items prescribed in 2023	Total items prescribed in 2022
Temazepam (Schedule 3)	down by 19%	1,752	2,152
Methadone (Schedule 2)	down by 12%	249,631	282,184
Buprenorphine (Schedule 3)	down by 7%	114,887	123,600

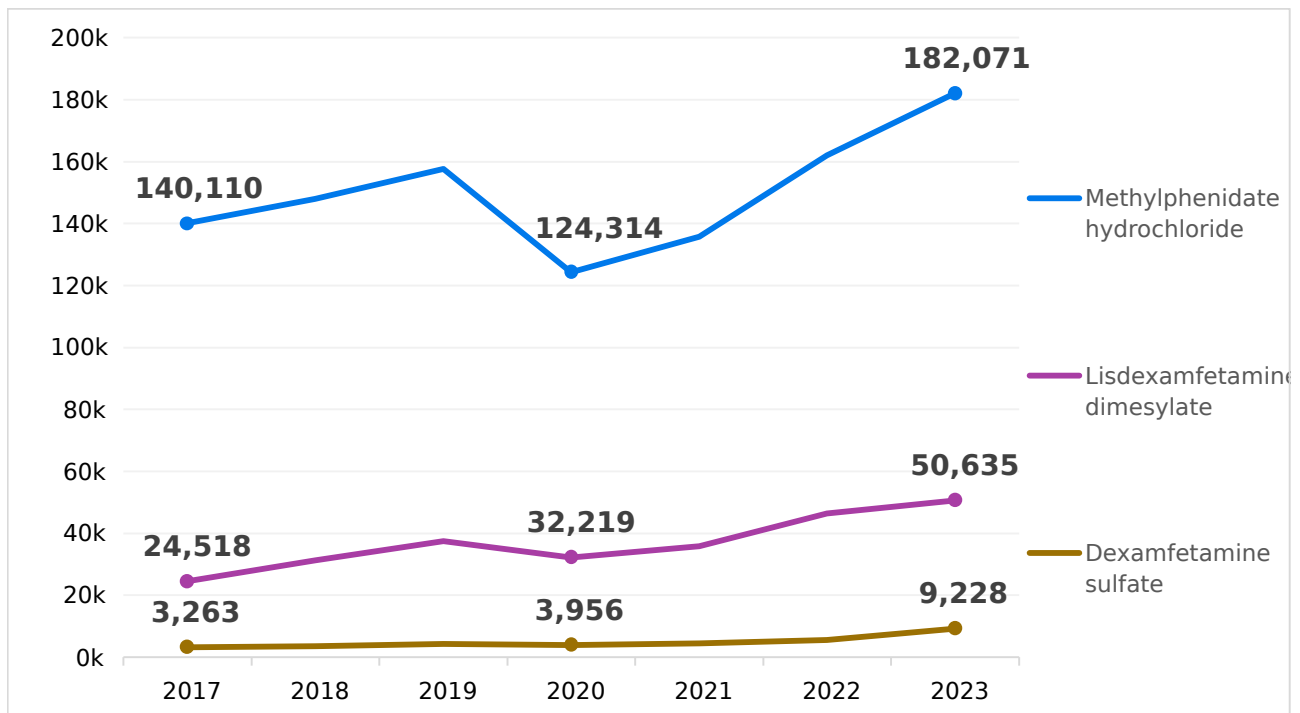
Figure 13: Key increases in hospital prescribing of controlled drugs for community pharmacy dispensing in 2023

Controlled drug	Change	Total items prescribed in 2023	Total items prescribed in 2022
Dexamfetamine (Schedule 2)	up by 64%	9,228	5,627
Co-dydramol (Schedule 5)	up by 33%	3,206	2,406
Dihydrocodeine (Schedule 5)	up by 30%	5,392	4,139

Controlled drug	Change	Total items prescribed in 2023	Total items prescribed in 2022
Codeine (Schedule 5)	up by 30%	43,324	33,388
Morphine (Schedule 5)	up by 25%	20,362	16,230
Co-codamol (Schedule 5)	up by 19%	47,219	39,720
Zolpidem (Schedule 4)	up by 12%	5,371	4,793
Methylphenidate (Schedule 2)	up by 12%	182,071	161,943
Gabapentin (Schedule 3)	up by 11%	5,956	5,389
Pregabalin (Schedule 3)	up by 10%	24,239	22,108
Tramadol (Schedule 3)	up by 10%	7,571	6,903
Lisdexamfetamine (Schedule 2)	up by 9%	50,635	46,309

Controlled drug	Change	Total items prescribed in 2023	Total items prescribed in 2022
Oxycodone (Schedule 2)	up by 8%	4,040	3,734
Lorazepam (Schedule 4)	up by 8%	27,793	25,815

Figure 14: Number of items of methylphenidate, lisdexamfetamine and dexamfetamine prescribed in hospital for dispensing in the community in community in England, 2017 to 2023



The national NHS Community Pharmacist Consultation Service (CPCS) aims to reduce pressure on primary and urgent care services, including emergency departments and out-of-hours GP services. The service refers people to community pharmacies for advice, treatment, and urgent repeat prescriptions, and may supply certain controlled drugs in specific circumstances for a limited period.

Of all controlled drugs supplied in 2023, the majority supplied were in Schedule 5. We continue to see increases in the number of controlled drugs supplied through the CPCS. This could be associated with pressures in primary care, particularly in relation to timely access to GP services.

The controlled drugs most commonly supplied by the service in 2023 were:

- **co-codamol** (in a range of forms, including tablets and capsules) 30/500mg, 15/500mg and 8/500mg
- **codeine** 15mg and 30mg tablets
- **dihydrocodeine** 30mg tablets
- **morphine sulphate** oral solution 10mg/5ml
- **clonazepam** 500mcg tablets
- **clobazam** 10mg tablets
- **co-dydramol** 10/500mg tablets
- **diazepam** 2mg tablets
- **zopiclone** 7.5mg tablets

Private controlled drug prescribing in independent primary care

Total controlled drug items prescribed privately across independent primary care services:

390,788 items in 2023

225,482 items in 2022

This is an increase of 73%. As in 2022, the main contribution towards this trend comes from the increased prescribing of Schedule 2 controlled drugs licensed to treat ADHD.

Of all private prescribing of controlled drugs in independent primary care:

- **Schedule 2** accounted for 97%
- **Schedule 3** accounted for 3%

(Schedule 4 and 5 prescribing collectively accounted for less than 1% overall. Even though there is no requirement for Schedule 4 and 5 controlled drugs to be prescribed on the private prescription form FP10PCD, this sometimes still happens, which is why we always see a small percentage of these medicines in the data).

Private prescribing of Schedule 2 controlled drugs

Prescribing of Schedule 2 controlled drugs alone increased by 80%:

378,049 total items in 2023

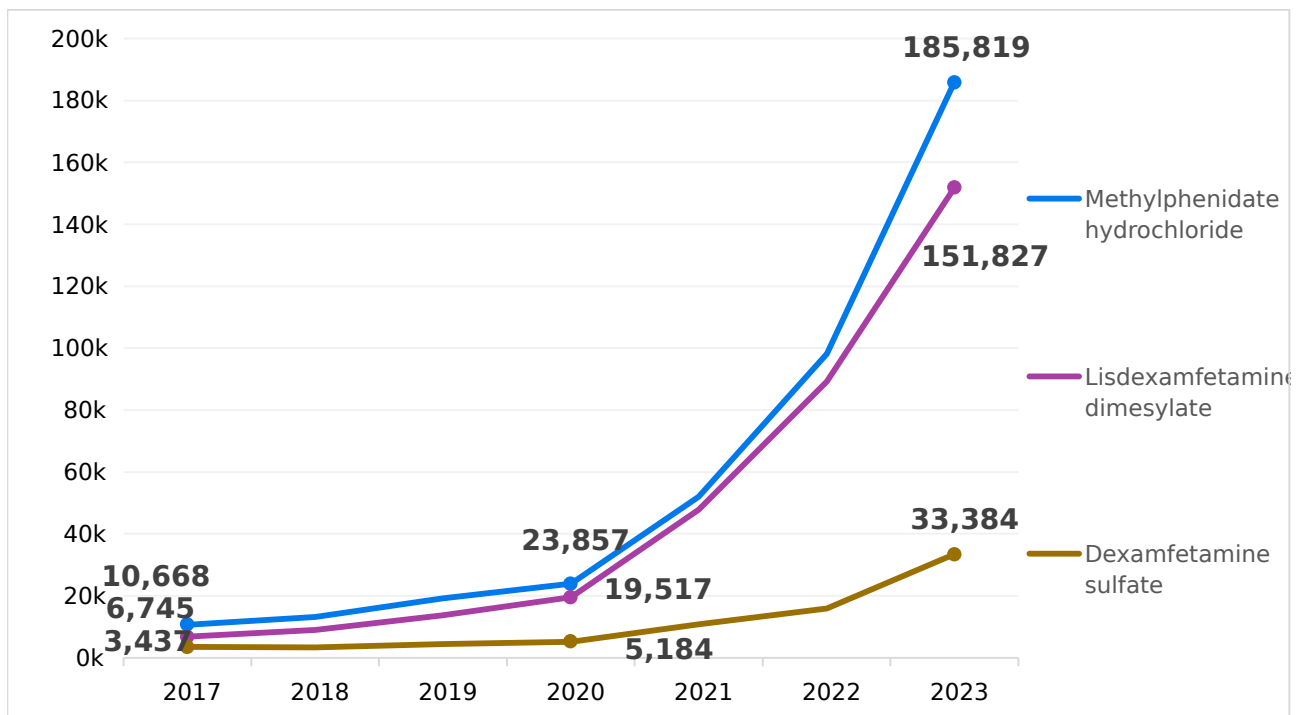
211,130 total items in 2022

This figure does not include unlicensed cannabis-based products for medicinal use and has largely been driven by the increase in prescribing for medicines licensed for ADHD (figures 15 and 16).

Figure 15: Schedule 2 controlled drugs prescribed in independent primary care in 2023

Controlled drug	Change	Total items prescribed in 2023	Total items prescribed in 2022
Methylphenidate	up by 89%	185,819	98,115
Lisdexamfetamine	up by 70%	151,827	89,297
Dexamfetamine	up by 111%	33,384	15,830

Figure 16: Number of items of methylphenidate, lisdexamfetamine and dexamfetamine prescribed annually in independent primary care in England, 2017 to 2023



We continue to monitor arrangements around safe prescribing of medicines to treat ADHD for people whose care is shared between different services. Although there were [shortages](#) of these medicines during 2023 and into 2024, we continue to see increased prescribing volumes. Increasing volumes is particularly evident in the private sector, which may be a result of long waiting times for access to NHS care.

Private prescribing of Schedule 3 controlled drugs

12,411 total items prescribed in 2023

13,383 total items prescribed in 2022

(a decrease of 7%)

Pregabalin: is the most prescribed drug in Schedule 3, accounting for 56% of all Schedule 3 prescribed items:

6,922 total items in 2023

7,395 total items in 2022

(a decrease of 6%)

Prescribing of some other Schedule 3 controlled drugs has reduced in 2023 compared with 2022 (figure 17):

Figure 17: Reductions in private prescribing of Schedule 3 controlled drugs in 2023

Controlled drug	Change	Total items prescribed in 2023	Total items prescribed in 2022
Buprenorphine	down by 8%	1,988	2,150

Controlled drug	Change	Total items prescribed in 2023	Total items prescribed in 2022
Midazolam	down by 18%	797	977
Gabapentin	down by 10%	865	964
Temazepam	down by 9%	540	595

Requisitions

Requisitions are documents that allow the appropriate people to order medicines for use in their professional practice, such as ordering a stock of controlled drugs that are later administered to patients.

The volume of requisitions has increased in the last year:

15,739 total items requisitioned in 2023

10,725 total items requisitioned in 2022

(an increase of 47%)

Looking at where these requisitions came from in 2023:

- 74% of all requisitions were from NHS providers (compared with 65% in 2022)
- 26% were from independent organisations (compared with 35% in 2022)

The top 10 controlled drugs on requisition remained the same in 2023 as for 2022. Figure 18 shows the most commonly requisitioned controlled drugs in 2023.

Figure 18: Requisitions of Schedule 2 and 3 controlled drugs in 2023

Controlled drug	Percentage of all requisitions	Total items
Pregabalin	20%	3,105
Methylphenidate	17%	2,677
Gabapentin	7%	1,175
Morphine sulfate (Schedule 2 and 5)	9%	1,411
Midazolam	8%	1,183
Oxycodone	10%	1,571
Buprenorphine	7%	1,086
Fentanyl	5%	832
Lisdexamfetamine	5%	749
Tramadol	4%	616

