

Prescription Drug Abuse

Angie overheard her parents talking about how her brother's ADHD medicine was making him less hungry. Because Angie was worried about her weight, she started sneaking one of her brother's pills every few days. To prevent her parents from finding out, she asked a friend to give her some of his ADHD medicine as well.

Todd found an old bottle of painkillers in the trash that had been left over from his dad's operation. He decided to try them. Because a doctor had prescribed the pills, Todd figured that meant the drugs were legal.

Fact: Taking prescription drugs in a way that hasn't been recommended by a doctor can be more dangerous than people think. In fact, it's drug abuse. And it's just as illegal as taking street drugs.

Facts About Prescription Drug Abuse

Fact #1 It is illegal to use prescription drugs without a valid prescription or to distribute them.

Fact #2 Emergency room visits associated with narcotic pain relievers have increased 163% since 1995.

Fact #3 Forty percent of impaired or dead drivers of motor vehicles show prescription drugs in their system—predominantly tranquilizers and sleeping pills.

Fact #4 The most commonly abused prescription drugs in the US fall into three broad categories:

- Opioids/Narcotics/Pain relievers (including OxyContin and Vicodin)
- Depressants (including Valium and Xanax)
- Stimulants (including Adderall and Ritalin)

Fact #5 2.7 million youth aged 12 to 17 abused prescription drugs at least once. (National Household Survey on Drug Abuse)

Fact #6 6.9 million individuals aged 18 to 25 abused prescription drugs at least once. (National Household Survey on Drug Abuse)

Fact #7 The risks associated with prescription drug abuse vary depending upon the drugs, and range from seizures to cardiovascular system failure to death.

Fact #8 Prescription drug addiction to benzodiazepines (sleeping pills, Valium, Ativan, Xanax) is far more debilitating than addiction to heroin or cocaine.

Fact #9 Young people usually obtain prescription drugs by stealing them from relatives or friends or from the school nurse's/doctor's office.

Fact #10 Effects of abusing cough syrup are nausea, heart palpitations, blackouts, and even brain damage or death.

Fact #11 In some parts of the country, you can only get over-the-counter cold medications in limited quantities from a pharmacist because some of the ingredients they contain can be used by illegal drug labs to make dangerous street drugs like crystal meth.

Did You Know?

- 4.5 million American children have reported that they've abused prescription drugs.



- 2.1 million American children have intentionally abused cough syrup. Every day 2,700 teens try a prescription medicine to get high for the first time.
- Half of teens do not see a great risk in abusing prescription (Rx) or over-the-counter (OTC) drugs. Teens believe that abuse of Rx and OTC medicines is safer than street drugs. Such drugs are easily accessible via medicine cabinets and the Internet.
- Over half of teens agree that prescription drugs are easier to get than illegal drugs.
- 1 in 3 teens report having a close friend who abuses Rx pain relievers to get high.
- 1 in 4 teens report having a close friend who abuses cough medicines to get high.
- Only 31% of teens learn a lot about the risk of drugs from their parents.
- Emergency room visits due to abuse of prescription drugs are more than the number of visits due to marijuana and heroin combined.

What types of prescription drugs are misused or abused?

Three types of drugs are misused or abused most often:

- **Opioids**—prescribed for pain relief or to relieve coughs or diarrhea (i.e., OxyContin, Vicodin, Demerol)
- **Central Nervous System (CNS) depressants**—barbiturates and benzodiazepines prescribed for anxiety or sleep problems or used to treat tension and panic attacks (often referred to as sedatives or tranquilizers) (i.e., Nembutal, Valium, Xanax)
- **Stimulants**—prescribed for attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), the sleep disorder narcolepsy, depression, asthma, or obesity (i.e., Ritalin, Adderall, Strattera)



Why do some people abuse prescription drugs?

- Because they think they will help them have more fun, lose weight, fit in, and even study effectively.
- Prescription drugs can be easier to get than street drugs.
- Some people think that prescription drugs are safer and less addictive than street drugs. After all, these are drugs that moms, dads, and even kid brothers and sisters use.
- Doctors are prescribing more drugs for more health problems, and online pharmacies make it easy to get prescription drugs without a prescription, even for teenagers.



How can you help prevent prescription drug misuse or abuse?

1. **Safeguard all drugs at home. Monitor quantities and control access.**
Take note of how many pills are in a bottle or pill packet, and keep track of refills. This goes for your own medication, as well as for your teen and other members of your household.
2. **Set clear rules for teens about all drug use, including not sharing medicine and always following the medical provider's advice and dosages.**
Make sure your teen uses prescription drugs only as directed by a medical provider and follows instructions for over-the-counter products carefully. This includes taking the proper dosage and not using with other substances without a medical provider's approval.
3. **Be a good role model by following these same rules with your own medicines.**
Examine your own behavior to ensure you set a good example. If you misuse your prescription drugs, such as share them with your children, or abuse them, your teen will take notice. Avoid sharing your drugs and always follow your medical provider's instructions.
4. **Properly conceal and dispose of old or unused medicines in the trash.**
Unused prescription drugs should be hidden and thrown away in the trash. So that teens or others don't take them out of the trash, you can mix them with an undesirable substance (like used coffee grounds or kitty litter) and put the mixture in an empty can or bag. Unless the directions say

otherwise, do NOT flush medications down the drain or toilet because the chemicals can pollute the water supply.

5. Ask friends and family to safeguard their prescription drugs as well.

Make sure your friends and relatives, especially grandparents, know about the risks, too, and encourage them to regularly monitor their own medicine cabinets. If there are other households your teen has access to, talk to those families as well about the importance of safeguarding medications. If you don't know the parents of your child's friends, then make an effort to get to know them, and get on the same page about rules and expectations for use of all drugs, including alcohol and illicit drugs.

What are the Dangers of Abusing Medications?

- Addiction, which is when the body gets used to the drug being in your system so when you try to stop, you experience withdrawals, is the biggest danger.
- Physical consequences:
 - Body function disruptions—including excessive sweating, urination or thirst
 - Drowsiness, dizziness, shaking, insomnia
 - Severe and extensive rashes
 - Hospitalization
 - Death
- Social consequences:
 - Losing longtime friends
 - Taking chances you normally wouldn't—like having unsafe sex (which could expose you to an STD and/or driving under the influence (this could lead to loss of license, or even more serious charges if someone is injured or killed in an accident)
 - Losing interest in appearance
 - Losing interest in family activities and/or organizations like clubs or sports
 - Stealing (to pay for drugs)
 - Developing a bad reputation



Proper Disposal of Prescription Drugs

- Take unused, unneeded, or expired prescription drugs out of their original containers and throw them in the trash.
- Mixing prescription drugs with an undesirable substance, such as used coffee grounds or kitty litter, and putting them in impermeable, non-descript containers, such as empty cans or sealable bags, will further ensure the drugs are not diverted.
- Flush prescription drugs down the toilet *only* if the label or accompanying patient information specifically instructs doing so.
- Take advantage of community pharmaceutical take-back programs that allow the public to bring unused drugs to a central location for proper disposal. Some communities have pharmaceutical take-back programs or community solid-waste programs that allow the public to bring unused drugs to a central location for proper disposal. Where these exist, they are a good way to dispose of unused pharmaceuticals.



What to Tell Your Child About Prescription Medications

- Pharmaceuticals taken without a prescription or a doctor's supervision can be just as dangerous as taking illicit drugs or alcohol.
- Abusing painkillers is like abusing heroin because their ingredients (both are opioids) are very similar.
- Prescription medications are powerful substances. While sick people taking medication under a doctor's care can benefit enormously, prescription medication can have a very different impact on a well person.

- Many pills look pretty much the same, but depending on the drug and the dosage, the effects can vary greatly from mild to lethal.
- Prescription medications, as all drugs, can cause dangerous interactions with other drugs or chemicals in the body.

Prescription Drug Abuse on the Rise Among High Schoolers

A 2005 survey by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America found that 19% of US teenagers reported having taken prescription drugs to get high. Both Vicodin and OxyContin have been particularly popular recently. Both drugs are now more popular among high school seniors than Ecstasy and cocaine. Ritalin and Aderall, used most often to treat attention deficit disorder, are also being abused at an alarming rate. Even drugs you might not associate with “getting high,” such as those used to treat anxiety disorders such as Xanax or Valium, are prime targets for teens.



There are even reports of “pharm parties” where young people are encouraged to bring pills to share with the other participants. The pills are allegedly dumped into a bowl or bag and the partiers grab whatever catches their fancy, often mixing drugs that, in combination with each other or with alcohol, which is usually also present, can have a lethal effect.

Another alarming trend with prescription drugs is that girls are more likely to abuse them than boys. The disparity is likely due in part to the propensity of many teens to pop pills in order to lose weight. The effect prescription drugs have on one’s judgment can interact with eating disorders to raise a host of fresh health threats. What many parents find most painful about teen prescription drug abuse is that, because most teens are always willing to sell off a few pills, many more children are in effect becoming drug dealers.

Warning Signs

Clues that your child may be abusing prescription or OTC drugs to get high:

- Visits to pro-drug Internet sites devoted to “how to” get and abuse prescription and OTC drugs.
- Cough or cold, prescription, or other unidentifiable medications among personal effects with no evidence of illness.
- Unexplained disappearance of medicines from medicine cabinet.
- Declining grades; loss of interest in hobbies and usual activities.
- Changes in friends, physical appearance, hygiene, and general behavior.
- Disrupted eating or sleeping patterns.



Contact Information

Contact your local school counselor for additional information. You may also contact Mrs. Patrice Harris, Intervention Supervisor, at 972-6857 or pharris@bcbe.org.