

Prescription Drug Abuse in Teens: Prescription for Harm

A Library and Resource Center on Alcohol, Tobacco, Other Drugs, Mental Health and Wellness

What Prescription Drugs Are Abused By Teens?

Abuse of prescription drugs covers a wide variety of medications. The prescription drugs most abused by teens are “opioid” pain relievers such as Darvon®, Dilaudid®, OxyContin®, Vicodin®, and products containing codeine or morphine. Teen abuse of prescription drugs also includes sedatives, tranquilizers, and stimulants such as Ritalin®, Concerta®, and Adderall®, which are known for treating attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).¹

A False Sense of Security

Because prescription drugs have been tested and are prescribed by doctors, youth may see no harm in using them—even if the medication was prescribed for someone else. Taken by the right person, at the right time, and in the right amount, prescription drugs are generally safe. Yet, like other forms of substance abuse, misuse of prescription drugs is risky. Abuse of pain relievers and drugs used to treat anxiety and sleep disorders can lead to dependence and addiction. In fact, abusing prescription pain relievers can be “as dangerous—and addictive—as using street narcotics and other illicit drugs.”²

High doses of stimulants, used to treat conditions such as ADHD and obesity, can cause high body temperatures and irregular heartbeat, paranoia, and hostility.³ In addition, teens may boost risk by “pharming”—mixing prescription drugs—or combining them with alcohol or illegal drugs.



Be Alert

To help prevent prescription drug abuse in your home, monitor your child. You can:

- Store prescription drugs where teens cannot get them
- Watch for missing drugs
- Keep an eye out for drugs in a teen’s possession
- Look for physical signs of use

Prescription drugs are easy to buy on the Internet, so look at the history of web sites your teen has visited and check credit card receipts.

Set an Example

Still, there is more to prevention than being watchful. Youth take cues from their parents. So, set a good example in your approach to prescription drugs:

- Only use medications when necessary. Being quick to seek prescriptions and to constantly reach for the medicine cabinet can give kids the idea that there’s a “pill for every ill.”
- Consider non-drug measures such as exercise, relaxation, meditation, or massage for relief of minor pain or other situations when prescription drugs are not vital to your health. Tell your kids about these options and when they apply.
- Show caution in taking prescription drugs or giving them to family members. Openly read instructions regarding prescribed doses, time between doses, and the need to avoid substances such as alcohol and certain other medications or foods when taking a prescription.

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- Keep medicine containers closed and out of the reach of young children and pets.
 - Ensure safety. Check labels about what not to do—for example, driving, using machinery, or climbing ladders when taking prescription drugs—and enforce these safeguards with family members.
- Be consistent. Making exceptions because you're too stressed out, uncomfortable, or in a hurry undermines your stance on prescription drugs.
 - Start early. Reinforcing a message of caution and restraint before your child reaches adolescence can build a solid foundation for resisting temptations and outside influences.

While most teens do not abuse prescription drugs, the rapid growth of the problem shows that parents need to pay attention. Stay alert, set a good example, and talk to your child about the dangers of abusing prescription drugs.

Conversation Starters:

Why do some people gulp down something without knowing if it's bad for them?

Do you think medications can do harm?

What does "illegal drug" mean to you?

¹ National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2005. NIDA Community Drug Alert Bulletin—Prescription Drugs, last referenced 5/31/2006.

² The Partnership for a Drug-Free America, 5/22/2006. Prescription Medication Abuse: A Growing Problem, last referenced 5/22/2006.

³ National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2005. NIDA InfoFacts: Prescription Pain and Other Medications, last referenced 5/31/2006.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
<http://family.samhsa.gov/be/prescriptionharm.aspx>