

# Facts on Prescription and Over-the-Counter Drugs



- Prescription drug abuse is when someone takes a prescription drug that was prescribed for someone else or in a manner or dosage other than what was prescribed.
- Opioids and stimulants are the most commonly abused prescription drugs.
- Prescription and over-the-counter drugs are the most commonly abused substance by Americans age 14 and older, after marijuana and alcohol.
- Abusing prescription drugs can have negative short- and long-term health consequences.
- When abused, some prescription drugs can be dangerous and can lead to severe health consequences, including addiction and overdose—just like illicit drugs can.

## PRESCRIPTION DRUG ABUSE

### What is Prescription Drug Abuse?

Prescription drug abuse is when someone takes a prescription drug that was prescribed for someone else or in a manner or dosage other than what was prescribed. Abuse can include taking a friend's or relative's prescription to get high, to treat pain, or because you think it will help with studying.

### What are the most commonly abused prescription and over-the-counter drugs?

Opioids (such as the pain relievers OxyContin and Vicodin), central nervous system depressants (e.g., Xanax, Valium), and stimulants (e.g., Ritalin, Adderall) are the most commonly abused prescription drugs. Some drugs that are available without a prescription—also known as over-the-counter drugs—also can be dangerous if they aren't taken according to the directions on the packaging. For example, DXM (dextromethorphan), the active cough suppressant found in many over-the-counter cough and cold medications, sometimes is abused, particularly by youth.

## TEENS AND PRESCRIPTION DRUGS

### How many teens abuse prescription drugs?

Prescription and over-the-counter drugs are the most commonly abused substances by Americans age 14 and older, after marijuana and alcohol.

According to NIDA's Monitoring the Future Study, in 2015, 12th graders reported 18.30% lifetime use, 12.90% past year use, and 5.90% past month use of prescription drugs.

### Where do teens get prescription drugs?

Both teens and young adults obtain the majority of prescription drugs from friends and relatives, sometimes without their knowledge. In one survey, 54 percent of high school seniors said that opioid drugs other than heroin (e.g., Vicodin) would be fairly or very easy to get.

## PRESCRIPTION DRUG ABUSE EFFECTS

### What happens when you abuse prescription drugs?

Abusing prescription drugs can have negative short- and long-term health consequences. Stimulant abuse can cause paranoia, dangerously high body temperatures, and an irregular heartbeat, especially if stimulants are taken in high doses or in ways other than in pill form. The abuse of opioids can cause drowsiness, nausea, constipation, and, depending on the amount taken, slowed breathing. Abusing depressants can cause slurred speech, shallow breathing, fatigue, disorientation, lack of coordination, and seizures (upon withdrawal from chronic abuse). Abuse of any of these substances may result in addiction.



Wheeler

CONNECTICUT  
Clearinghouse

a program of the Connecticut Center  
for Prevention, Wellness and Recovery

800.232.4424 (phone)

860.793.9813 (fax)

[www.ctclearinghouse.org](http://www.ctclearinghouse.org)

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

Abusing over-the-counter drugs that contain DXM—which usually involves taking doses much higher than recommended for treating coughs and colds—can impair motor function (such as walking or sitting up); produce numbness, nausea, and vomiting; and increase heart rate and blood pressure. Abusing any type of mind-altering drug can affect judgment and inhibition and may put a person at heightened risk for HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

#### **Aren't prescription drugs safer than illegal drugs, such as cocaine or heroin?**

No. Many people think that abusing prescription drugs is safer than abusing illicit drugs like heroin because the manufacturing of prescription drugs is regulated or because they are prescribed by doctors. That doesn't mean these drugs are safe for someone other than the person with the prescription to use. Many prescription drugs have powerful effects in the brain and body – and people sometimes take them in ways that can be just as dangerous (e.g. crushing pills, and snorting or injecting them) as illicit drug use. In fact, opioid painkillers act on the same sites in the brain as heroin, which is one reason why they can be so dangerous when abused. Also, abusing prescription drugs is illegal – and that includes sharing prescriptions with friends.

#### **If prescription drugs are dangerous, why are they prescribed by doctors?**

Virtually every medication presents some risk of undesirable side effects, sometimes even serious ones. Doctors consider the potential benefits and risks to each patient before prescribing medications. Doctors ask about patients' medical history, including what other health problems they have and what other medications they take. Based on this and other information (e.g., age and weight of the patient), physicians can prescribe medications while minimizing the risks. When abused, some prescription drugs can be dangerous and can lead to severe health consequences, including addiction and overdose—just like illicit drugs can.

#### **Why don't people who take prescription drugs for medical conditions become addicted?**

On rare occasions, they do, which is why a person must be under a doctor's care while taking prescription medications, and sometimes when stopping their use. Long-term medical use of certain prescription drugs can lead to "physical dependence" because of the way the brain and the body naturally adapt to chronic drug exposure. A person may need larger doses of the drug to achieve the same initial effects (tolerance), and when drug use is stopped, withdrawal symptoms can occur. Dependence is **not** the same as addiction. Addiction is when someone continues to take the drug even when they know it is severely affecting his or her life.

#### **Is it dangerous to abuse prescription drugs in combination with other drugs?**

Yes. Both prescription and over-the-counter drugs pose increased risk of health complications when combined with other prescription medications, over-the-counter medicines, illicit drugs, or alcohol. For example, combining opioids with alcohol can intensify respiratory distress and lead to death.

## Connecticut Resources

Department of Mental Health  
and Addiction Services  
[www.ct.gov/dmhas](http://www.ct.gov/dmhas)

24/7 Access Line:  
1-800-563-4086

Department of  
Consumer Protection  
Prescription Monitoring  
Program  
[www.ct.gov/dcp/pmp](http://www.ct.gov/dcp/pmp)

## National Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental  
Health Services Administration  
[www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)  
1.800.662.HELP (4357)

National Institute on  
Drug Abuse  
[www.drugabuse.gov](http://www.drugabuse.gov)

