

HANDS-ON Health

Health Wave Newsletter

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Teens and The Abuse of Prescription and Over-the-Counter Drugs

Teens are abusing some prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) drugs to get high. This includes painkillers, such as those drugs prescribed after surgery; depressants, such as sleeping pills or anti-anxiety drugs; and stimulants, such as those drugs prescribed for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Teens are also abusing over-the-counter drugs, such as cough and cold remedies.

The percentage of persons aged 12 or older who used prescription-type psychotherapeutic drugs nonmedically in the past month in 2013 (2.5 percent) was similar to the percentages in 2010 to 2012 (ranging from 2.4 to 2.7 percent).

Because these drugs are so readily available, teens who wouldn't otherwise touch illicit drugs might abuse prescription drugs. And not many parents are talking to them about it, even though teens report that parental disapproval is a powerful way to keep them away from drugs.

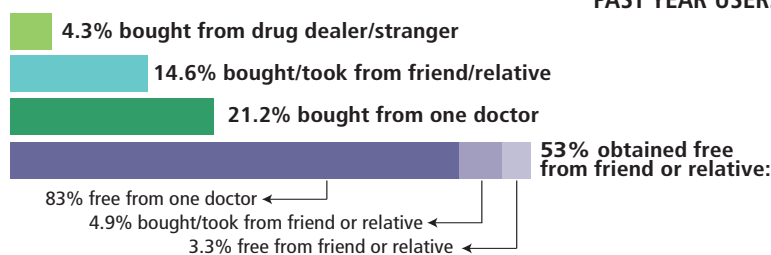
Where are teens getting prescription and over-the-counter drugs?

Past year nonmedical users of psychotherapeutic drugs are asked how they obtained the drugs for their most recent nonmedical use. Rates averaged across 2012 and 2013 show that more than half of the nonmedical users of pain relievers, tranquilizers, stimulants, and sedatives aged 12 or older got the prescription drugs they most recently used "from a friend or relative for free." More than four in five of these nonmedical users who obtained prescription drugs from a friend or relative for free indicated that their friend or relative had obtained the drugs from one doctor.

The numbers of persons aged 12 or older who received their most recent treatment in the past year for alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, hallucinogens, inhalants, and sedatives were similar in 2002 and 2013.

However, the number of persons who received **treatment for tranquilizers increased from 2002 (197,000 persons) to 2013 (376,000 persons)**. The number who received **treatment for heroin increased from 277,000 persons in 2002 to 526,000 persons in 2013**. The number who received **treatment for non-medical use of prescription pain relievers increased from 2002 (360,000 persons) to 2013 (746,000 persons)**. The number who received **treatment for stimulants increased from 268,000 persons in 2002 to 461,000 persons in 2013**.

SOURCE OF PAIN RELIEVERS FOR MOST RECENT NONMEDICAL USE AMONG PAST YEAR USERS



Source: SAMHSA, 2013; National Survey on Drug Use and Health, SAMHSA, 2014

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What are the dangers?

There are serious health risks. Emergency room visits involving prescription and over-the-counter drug abuse grew 81 percent from 2004 to 2008. A single large dose of prescription or over-the-counter painkillers or depressants can cause breathing difficulty that can lead to death. Stimulant abuse can lead to hostility or paranoia, or the potential for heart system failure or fatal seizures. Even in small doses, depressants and painkillers have subtle effects on motor skills, judgment, and ability to learn, which can increase the risk of injury.

The abuse of over-the-counter cough and cold remedies can cause blurred vision, nausea, vomiting, dizziness, coma, and even death. In 2004, nearly half of all emergency room visits resulting from abuse of cough or cold remedies were patients between the ages of 12 and 20.

Many teens report mixing prescription drugs, over-the-counter drugs, and alcohol. Using these drugs in combination can cause respiratory failure and death.

Many of these drugs can be addictive. Between 1997 and 2007, the number of treatment admissions for prescription painkillers increased by more than 400 percent. Teens who first abuse prescription drugs before age 16 also have a greater risk of drug dependence later in life.

What are the brand names of some of these drugs?

Painkillers: **VICODIN, TYLENOL WITH CODEINE, OXYCONTIN, PERCOCET**

Depressants: **KLONOPIN, NEMBUTAL, SOMA, VALIUM, XANAX**

Stimulants: **ADDERALL, CONCERTA, DEXDRINE, RITALIN**

OTCs: **CORICIDIN HBP COUGH AND COLD, ROBITUSSIN, VICKS FORMULA 44 COUGH RELIEF**, and others



Parents and caregivers are the first line of defense in addressing this troubling trend

HOW CAN I TELL IF MY TEEN IS ABUSING THESE DRUGS?

Some signs that your teen might be using prescription and/or over-the-counter drugs include constricted pupils, slurred speech, or flushed skin. Other signs and symptoms may vary, but parents should be alert to the following: personality changes, mood swings, irritability, excessive energy, sleepiness or avoiding sleep, sweating, loss of appetite, forgetfulness, or clumsiness.

Watch for signs around the house such as missing pills, unfamiliar pills, or empty cough and cold medicine bottles or packages. If your teen has a prescription, keep control of the bottle. Be alert to your teen running out of pills quickly, losing pills, or requesting refills.

Other signs might include secretiveness, loss of interest in personal appearance, borrowing money or having extra cash, skipping classes, or not doing well in school.

WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT THIS PROBLEM?

"Think about your home. What prescription and over-the-counter drugs do you have? Where are they kept? Would you know if some were missing? The good news is that you can take steps immediately to limit access to these drugs and help keep your teen drug-free:

1. Safeguard all drugs at home. Monitor quantities and control access.
2. Set clear rules for teens about all drug use, including not sharing medicine and always following the medical provider's advice and dosages.
3. Be a good role model by following these same rules with your own medicines.
4. Properly conceal and dispose of old or unused medicines in the trash.
5. Ask friends and family to safeguard their prescription drugs as well.

Talk to your teen about the dangers of abusing prescription and over-the-counter drugs. These are powerful drugs that, when misused, are just as dangerous as illegal street drugs. Tell your teen it's not worth the risk.

To learn more about teen prescription drug abuse, visit www.TheAntiDrug.com or call 1-800-788-2800 to request free materials. For information about a drug treatment center close to you, visit www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov or call the SAMHSA Health Information Network (SHIN) at the number listed above.

National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign Office of National Drug Control Policy



Consider these facts:

- Teens are engaging in dangerous activities, such as crushing pills, then snorting or injecting their contents. They also combine them with alcohol or illicit drugs. At “pharming parties,” they may dump a variety of drugs in a bowl and take them without knowing what they are.
- Teens most commonly abuse pain relievers (e.g., OxyContin® and Vicodin®), stimulants (e.g., Ritalin® and Adderall®), and sedatives and tranquilizers (e.g., Valium® and Xanax®).
- It is surprisingly easy for teens to gain access to prescription drugs from their families’ medicine cabinets, a friend’s purse, and even a school-mate’s locker!
- Young people sometimes illegally order controlled prescription drugs from illegal Web sites.

Prescription drugs provide benefits when used correctly under the care of a health provider. But when abused, they can be just as dangerous as illicit drugs.

Source: Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration. SAMHSA is a public health agency within the Department of Health and Human Services. Its mission is to reduce the impact of substance abuse and mental illness on America’s communities. <http://www.samhsa.gov>

What do Educators Need to Know?

Help your students understand prescription drug abuse—whether you are a health teacher or simply work closely with students as an athletic coach, mentor, or guidance counselor. Take even just a moment to have a brief conversation in the hallways or locker room. Remind your students that you are there to help.

WHAT DO TEENS NOT ALWAYS REALIZE?

- Abusing prescription drugs, even if they are prescribed by a doctor, is not safer than abusing illegal drugs.
- Misusing prescription drugs can lead to addiction.
- Using prescription drugs without a doctor’s prescription or abusing someone else’s prescriptions—or your own—is always harmful, not to mention illegal.

HOW DO I RECOGNIZE THE SIGNS OF PRESCRIPTION DRUG ABUSE?

- Decreased or obsessive interest in school work
- Fatigue, red or glazed eyes, and repeated health complaints
- Sudden mood changes, including irritability, negative attitude, personality changes, and general lack of interest in extracurricular activities
- An extreme change in groups of friends or hangout locations

WHAT SHOULD I REMIND MY STUDENTS TO DO?

- Respect the power of medicine and use it properly.
- Recognize that all medicines, including prescription drugs, have risks along with benefits. The risks tend to increase dramatically when medicines are abused.
- Take responsibility for learning how to take prescription drugs safely and appropriately. Seek help at the first sign of their own or a friend’s problem.

HOW CAN I HELP?

- Speak to your students about prescription drug abuse—do not presume that illegal drugs are the only threat.
- Alert parents if you are concerned about their child. Let parents know what they can do. A brochure for parents, “Talking to your kids about prescription drug abuse,” is available at www.talkaboutrx.org.
- Provide a safe and open environment for your students to talk about abuse issues. Empathize with the stresses of growing up and identify positive outlets that can help relieve teens’ stress, such as sports teams and youth groups.
- Hold interactive discussions with your students to dispel myths and give them the facts.
- Encourage students to speak with you or another faculty member if they suspect a friend may have a problem.
- Be observant about discussions students may have in the hallways about prescription drug abuse. If you hear misconceptions, join in to correct them and show your support.