



# FACTS ON PRESCRIPTION AND OVER-THE-COUNTER DRUGS

## 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 help with studying, or even to treat pain.

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, and stimulants are the most commonly abused prescription drugs.<sup>1</sup> 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?

In 2008, 1.9 million youth (or 7.7 percent of youth) age 12 to 17 abused prescription drugs, with 1.6 million (6.5 percent) abusing a prescription pain medication. That makes painkillers one of the most commonly abused drugs by teens after tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana.<sup>2</sup> In fact, on average, 2,000 teenagers age 12 to 17 per day used a prescription drug without a doctor's guidance for the first time.

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. And in one survey, 35 percent of high school seniors said that opioid drugs other than heroin (e.g., Vicodin or methadone) would be fairly or very easy to get.<sup>3</sup>

Why do teens abuse prescription drugs?

Teens abuse prescription drugs for a number of reasons, including to get high, to help them with school work, and to treat pain. Interestingly, teenage boys and girls tend to abuse some types of prescription drugs for different reasons. For example, boys are more apt to abuse prescription stimulants to get high, while girls tend to abuse them to self-medicate.

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## Prescription Drug Abuse Effects

What happens when you abuse prescription drugs?

Abusing prescription drugs can have negative short- and long-term health consequences.<sup>4</sup> Stimulant abuse can cause paranoia, dangerously high body temperatures, and an irregular heartbeat, especially if taken in high doses or by routes other than in pill form.<sup>5</sup> 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 physical dependence or addiction.<sup>6</sup>

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. But that doesn't mean these drugs are safe for someone other than the person with the prescription to use. Many prescription drugs can 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 the contents) as illicit drug abuse. 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, what other medications they take, and whether they have a history of problems with addiction or other mental illnesses. Based on this and other information (e.g., age and weight of the patient), physicians can prescribe drugs while minimizing the risks. But when abused, some prescription drugs can be dangerous and can lead to severe health consequences, including addiction—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. A doctor prescribes medication based on an individual's need—each patient is examined for symptoms and receives a dose of medication that will treat the problem effectively and safely. Typically, prescription drugs are taken in a form (e.g., a pill) that doesn't allow for rapid absorption of the drug by the brain, which reduces the likelihood of addiction. However, if taken for reasons other than for what the drugs were intended, in ways not prescribed, or at higher doses than prescribed, prescription drug use can lead to addiction. *(continued on page 3)*

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Why don't people who take prescription drugs for medical conditions become addicted?  
(cont.)

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. Tolerance is **not** the same as addiction (although it also happens to someone who is addicted). It is one of the many reasons why prescription drugs need to be taken—and **stopped**—under a physician’s guidance.

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.<sup>7</sup>

## References

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“**Facts on Prescription and Over-the-Counter Drugs**” is part of a series of fact sheets from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) that are designed to inform students, parents, educators, and mentors about the harmful effects of prescription drug abuse. To learn more about how you can get involved in spreading the word about the dangers of prescription drug abuse, visit <http://teens.drugabuse.gov/PEERx>.

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