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Prescription Drug Misuse in Youth

Did you know...

Ten percent (2.5 million) of young people aged 12 to 17 years have abused drugs at least once.¹ Among those aged 17 to 25 years, 21% (7.4 million) have done it.¹

Marijuana is the drug most commonly misused. It is followed by prescription drugs.^{1,2} These include pain relievers, stimulants, sedatives, and tranquilizers. We will focus on them in this newsletter.

Why these drugs are prescribed

Pain relievers help stop chronic pain. It can be caused by an injury, headache, lower back problems, arthritis, nerve damage, an infection such as shingles, cancer, or other conditions.

Stimulants are used to treat attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and narcolepsy. People with ADHD have trouble sitting still, paying attention, and finishing things. People with narcolepsy are drowsy and fall asleep a lot during the day.

Sedatives and tranquilizers help people relax, get to sleep and stay asleep, or prevent or stop seizures.

Young people take these drugs to...

- Get high, have more fun
- Deal with stress or anxiety
- Decrease inhibitions, fit in
- Stay awake to study
- Improve sports performance
- Enhance self-esteem
- Lose weight
- Treat unwanted effects caused by other drugs they are abusing

Where young people get these drugs

Most get them for free from friends or relatives who have a prescription for the drug. Stealing from friends, relatives, or pharmacies; forging prescriptions; buying them on the street; and getting prescriptions from more than one doctor are other ways of getting these drugs.



Commonly misused prescription drugs*

Prescription pain relievers

- Codeine
- Hydrocodone (Vicodin®)
- Hydromorphone (Dilaudid®)
- Oxycodone (OxyContin®, Percocet®, Percodan®)
- Oxymorphone (Opana®)

Stimulants

- Amphetamine (Adderall®, Dexedrine®)
- Methylphenidate (Concerta®, Ritalin®)

Anti-anxiety/Sedative-Hypnotics

- Alprazolam (Niravam®, Xanax®)
- Chlordiazepoxide (Librium®)
- Clonazepam (Klonopin®)
- Diazepam (Valium®, Valrelease®)
- Eszopiclone (Lunesta®)
- Lorazepam (Ativan®)
- Zaleplon (Sonata®)
- Zolpidem (Ambien®)

*This list is not all-inclusive.

Dangers of drug misuse

These drugs have many effects on the body. The effects can be different for the different types of drugs. For example, stimulants raise blood pressure and heart rate. Pain relievers lower them.

Some effects may be relatively mild. They include restlessness, nervousness, change in pupil size, clammy skin, relaxed muscles, sleepiness, confusion, and headache. Other effects such as reduced reaction time, slurred speech, nausea, and vomiting mimic drunkenness.

Effects on the heart and lungs are life-threatening. For example, if breathing slows down or stops, the person can become unconscious, go into a coma, or die. If blood pressure and heart rate increase too much, the person could have a heart attack or stroke and die.

Many of these drugs are addictive. And the impact is often worse when they are combined with other drugs or alcohol. Withdrawal from the drug may also be life-threatening.

What young people can do

- Tell their doctor about *all* the drugs they're taking.
- Learn about the dangers of misusing any drug their doctor prescribes for them.
- Be sure they take the drug only as directed. Don't change doses or stop taking the drug without talking with their doctor. Withdrawal can be dangerous if not done right.
- Store the drug in a safe, secure place and don't share it with others.
- Get regular drug tests as ordered by their doctor.
- Properly discard unused or expired drugs. See <http://www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/ucm101653.htm> for details.
- Use only drugs their doctor prescribes for them. Don't use someone else's drug.
- If they have a drug problem, set recovery goals and seek treatment.

Did you know...

Laboratories play an important role in reducing drug misuse. They offer testing that helps the doctor know if the patient is taking the drug as directed. Testing can also help find out if the patient's body is processing the drug as expected. Urine drug testing can detect other, nonprescribed drugs that the individual might be taking too. All this can help the patient stay safe.

Quest Diagnostics is a laboratory company that does urine drug testing. Quest Diagnostics has special reports to alert the doctor when there are unexpected results. The company also has experts in drug testing who can help doctors with hard cases.

References

1. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Results from the 2011 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Summary of National Findings. <http://www.samhsa.gov/data/NSDUH/2k11Results/NSDUHresults2011.htm#Fig2-5>. September 2012. Accessed July 1, 2013.
2. Johnston LD, O'Malley PM, Bachman JG, et al. Monitoring the Future national results on drug use: 2012 overview, key findings on adolescent drug use. <http://www.monitoringthefuture.org/pubs/monographs/mtf-overview2012.pdf>. February 2013. Accessed July 1, 2013.