

PRESCRIPTION DRUG MISUSE

What Parents & Educators Need to Know

What is prescription drug misuse?

Prescription drug misuse is the use of prescription medication in a manner that is not directed by a health care practitioner.

How big a problem is prescription drug misuse?

Most people take prescription medication as directed by a doctor, but there has been a steady increase in the non-medical use of these drugs. While alcohol, tobacco and marijuana are, by far, the drugs most commonly used by young people, prescription (Rx) and over-the-counter (OTC) medications are becoming new “party” drugs. According to the 2007 Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 16 percent of students in grades 8-12 have reported using a prescription drug not meant for them at least once in their lifetime. Many parents are not aware that these drugs can be purchased from the internet, and more surprisingly that their own medicine cabinets are potential sources.

What are some of the most commonly misused prescription drugs?

Although any prescription drug can be misused, the three most common types are:

- **Painkillers**, also known as narcotics or opiates. Examples include morphine, codeine, OxyContin (oxycodone), Vicodin (hydrocodone) and Percocet (oxycodone and Tylenol). A large single dose can cause severe respiratory depression and death. Long-term misuse leads to physical dependence and, in some cases, addiction.
- **Central Nervous System Depressants**, which are prescribed to treat anxiety and sleep disorders. Examples are Nembutal (pentobarbital sodium), Valium (diazepam), Lorazepam (ativan) and Xanax (alprazolam). They slow down normal brain function and can cause a drowsy, uncoordinated feeling. Large doses of some of these, especially in conjunction with alcohol and/or other drugs, can slow down breathing and cause a coma. Long-term misuse can lead to physical dependence and addiction.
- **Stimulants** are often prescribed to treat attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Examples include Ritalin (methylphenidate) and Dexedrine (dextroamphetamine). These drugs raise blood pressure and heart rate. High doses can cause dangerously high body temperature and cardiac arrest brought on by an abnormal heartbeat.



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What are some of the commonly misused over-the-counter (OTC) medicines?

OTC drugs are available at any pharmacy or drug store without a prescription. Like prescription drugs, they are safe when used according to package directions or as directed by a medical professional. OTC medicines, including sleep aids such as doxylamine (Unisom), antihistamines such as diphenhydramine (Benadryl) and cough suppressants containing dextromethorphan (DXM, Robitussin), are misused for their psychoactive effects. Some OTC products used medically to treat allergies and colds contain drugs that can cause serious harm if abused in large doses for non-medical purposes. Over-the-counter drug abuse is extremely dangerous.

What can I do to help prevent youth from misusing prescription and over-the-counter medications?

EDUCATE yourself about medications that young people are abusing. Share this information with others who are in contact with your children—other parents, caregivers, relatives, school administrators, coaches, counselors, etc.

START A CONVERSATION This is never easy, but it's also not as hard as you may think. Take advantage of everyday opportunities and in no time at all, you will have developed an ongoing dialogue with your child. Teachable moments are about using everyday events in your life to point out things you would like your child to know about. When you talk to your children about drugs, make sure to include prescription and OTC medication misuse.

See what your children know about peers using medications without doctors' orders. *Preliminary research shows teens believe experimenting with medications are safer than street drugs.* Abuse of medications can be life threatening. Set clear expectations with your teenagers, letting them know that under no circumstances should they ever take medications without your knowledge. Getting high with prescription and OTC medication is NOT safer than getting high with street drugs.

SAFEGUARD medications at home and other places. Ask your healthcare provider if any medications prescribed for your family have a potential for misuse. Take a count of prescription and OTC medications in your home and pay attention to quantities. Keep medications out of reach and out of easy to access places like the medicine cabinet. If your child needs medications during school hours, speak with school officials about their policy for giving out medications to students. If possible, personally take the medications to the school nurse, and make sure unused medications are returned to you.

For information and resources, log on to healthvermont.gov/adap/adap.aspx and click on Prescription and OTC Drug Misuse or call 802-651-1550.

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