

Fact Sheet: Preventing Teen Prescription Medicine Abuse

What is prescription medicine abuse?

Prescription (Rx) medicine abuse is the use of an Rx medicine to create an altered state, to get high, or for any reasons other than those intended by the prescribing doctor.

How many teens are doing this?

According to research conducted by The Partnership at Drugfree.org, one in six teens say they have taken a prescription medicine – that was not prescribed to them – at least once in their lifetime. This behavior cuts across geographic, racial, ethnic and socioeconomic boundaries.

Why are some teens doing this?

Teens are engaging in this dangerous behavior for a variety of reasons. In some cases, they do it to party and get high, but also to manage stress or regulate their lives. Some are abusing prescription stimulants used to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) to provide additional energy and the ability to focus when they're studying or taking tests. Many teens are abusing pain relievers and tranquilizers to cope with academic, social or emotional stress.

What are the risks?

There are both immediate and long-term risks to medicine abuse. In the short term, overdosing can be fatal, as can mixing Rx medicine with over-the-counter medicine and/or alcohol. In the longer term, prescription opioids (pain relievers) and other prescription medicines have been proven to be potentially addictive. Relying on Rx medicines at a young age to help “manage” life can establish a lifelong pattern of dependency and prevent teens from learning important coping skills.

Where are teens getting prescription medicine?

Two-thirds (65 percent) of teens who report abuse of prescription medicine are getting them from friends, family and acquaintances. Some teens share Rx medicines among themselves —handing out or selling their own pills or those they've acquired or stolen from classmates. A very small minority of teens also say they get their prescription medicine illicitly from doctors, pharmacists or over the internet.

Are parents educating their children about the risks of this behavior?

Research conducted by The Partnership at Drugfree.org shows that parents are not communicating the risks of prescription medicine abuse to their children as often as they talk about street drugs. This is partly because some parents are unaware of the behavior (which wasn't as prevalent when they were teenagers), and partly because those who are aware of teen medicine abuse tend to underestimate the risks just as teens do. A recent study by The Partnership at Drugfree.org showed that 33 percent of parents have taken a prescription medicine without having a prescription for it themselves or to get high. This sets a dangerous example for their kids, teaching them that they don't need to follow guidelines for proper use of Rx medicines.

WHAT SHOULD PARENTS DO?

- 1. Educate yourself** – Visit drugfree.org and MedicineAbuseProject.org for information, tools, resources and support.
- 2. Communicate the risks of prescription medicine abuse to your kids.** Children who learn a lot about the risks of drugs at home are up to 50 percent less likely to use drugs than those who do not get that critical message from their parents.
- 3. Safeguard your medicine.** Keep prescription medicine in a secure place, count and monitor the number of pills you have and lock them up — and ask your friends and family members to do the same.
- 4. Get help.** If you think your child has a problem with prescription medicine abuse, please visit drugfree.org/timetohelp or call our Parents Toll-Free Helpline to speak to a parent specialist at 1-855-DRUGFREE (1-855-378-4373)

Learn more at drugfree.org and MedicineAbuseProject.org.

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