

## **Youth Prescription Drug Abuse: A Growing Concern**

By Belinda Basca

**R**yan is a 17-year-old basketball star, who has just started his senior year with a potentially career-ending injury. He's prescribed painkillers by his doctor, but after seeing his father's downfall due to prescription drug abuse, Ryan is wary of taking them. What should he do when his girlfriend asks him for his extra pills and the kids around school start pressuring him to share his stash?

Unfortunately, situations like this are becoming all too common among youth today. According to a national study conducted by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America, the intentional abuse of prescription (Rx) medications by youth is on the rise. Prescription drugs have become the second most abused drug, behind marijuana, among youth ages 12-17.

This Prevention Tactic focuses on the intentional abuse of prescription drugs among teens. First, the prescription medications commonly abused are identified. Secondly, the prevalence and accessibility of prescription drugs among teens is explored. Finally, effective strategies for preventing and addressing this issue in local communities are discussed.

Today nearly one in five teens (19 percent or 4.5 million) report abusing prescription medications to get high.

- Partnership for a Drug-Free America's 18th annual study



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**Tactics** (Tak'tiks) n. 1. a plan for promoting a desired end. 2. the art of the possible.

## Prescription medications commonly abused by youth

The most common prescriptions used include opiates, central nervous system depressants, and stimulants, all of which have addictive potential.<sup>1</sup>

**Opiates.** Taken as directed, opiates are very effective analgesics (pain relievers). They can also create an intense sense of euphoria. The most commonly known prescription opiates are Vicodin<sup>®</sup> and OxyContin<sup>®</sup>. Although produced in laboratories, these medications share similar potential for addiction and medical consequences as heroin.

**Central Nervous System (CNS) Depressants.** Often referred to as sedatives, these are substances that slow down normal brain functioning. There are two types of CNS depressants – barbiturates and benzodiazepines. These are primarily used to treat anxiety and sleep disorders. In higher doses, some CNS depressants can be used as general anesthetics.

**Stimulants.** Stimulants are a class of drugs that enhance brain activity. These medications are prescribed to treat narcolepsy and most notably attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). They increase alertness, attention, and energy as well as elevate blood pressure, heart rate, and respiration.

### **Common opiates include:**

- Morphine (Kadian<sup>®</sup>, Avinza<sup>®</sup>)
- Codeine
- Oxycodone (OxyContin<sup>®</sup>, Percodan<sup>®</sup>, Percocet<sup>®</sup>)
- Hydrocodone (Lortab<sup>®</sup>, Lorcet<sup>®</sup>, Vicodin<sup>®</sup>)
- Propoxyphene (Darvon<sup>®</sup>)
- Fentanyl (Duragesic)
- Hydromorphone (Dilaudid<sup>®</sup>)

### **Common CNS Depressants include**

#### Barbiturates

- Mephobarbital (Mebaral<sup>®</sup>)
- Pentobarbital sodium (Nembutal<sup>®</sup>)
- Butalbital (Fioricet<sup>®</sup>)

#### Benzodiazepines

- Diazepam (Valium<sup>®</sup>)
- Chlordiazepoxide HCl (Librium<sup>®</sup>)
- Alprazolam (Xanax<sup>®</sup>)
- Triazolam (Halcion<sup>®</sup>)
- Estazolam (ProSom<sup>®</sup>)

### **Common stimulants include:**

- Adderall
- Dextroamphetamine (Dexedrine<sup>®</sup>)
- Methylphenidate

## Over-the-Counter (OTC) Drug Abuse

While over-the-counter (OTC) medicines provide millions with relief from cold and cough symptoms, youth are also abusing these medicines to get high. In 2006, about 3.1 million people age 12 to 25 had used an OTC cough and cold medication to get high, and nearly 1 million had done so in the past year. The 2007 Monitoring the Future (MTF) survey estimates the intentional abuse of cough medicine among 8th, 10th, and 12th graders at roughly 4%, 5%, and 6% respectively. Cough and cold medicines containing dextromethorphan (DXM) are commonly abused, these include: Coricidin<sup>®</sup>, Robitussin, and NyQuil<sup>®</sup> products. Other OTC drugs abused are sleep aids (Unisom<sup>®</sup>), antihistamines (Benadryl<sup>®</sup>), and anti-nausea agents (Gravol<sup>®</sup> or Dramamine<sup>®</sup>).

*Misuse of Over-the Counter Cough and Cold Medications among Persons Aged 12 to 25. (2008). The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) Report. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration <http://www.oas.samhsa.org/2k8/cough/cough.htm>.*

## Trends in prescription drug abuse among youth

### Prevalence

According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) 2005-2006 survey findings, teens are more likely to have abused prescription drugs than most illicit drugs. Nearly 1 in 5 teens reported using a prescription medication that was not prescribed to them. Teen girls between the ages of 12-17 were more likely to have abused prescription drugs than males the same age (9.9% of females and 8.2% of males).

Although illicit drug use by teens is declining, teen prescription drug abuse is an emerging threat.

- 2007 *Monitoring the Future Survey Report*

The Monitoring the Future (MTF) survey<sup>2</sup> has found similar results: non-medical use of narcotic drugs is the second most prevalent drug used among high school seniors. Vicodin® and OxyContin® are the two drugs that have accounted for recent increases in prescription pain pills among youth. Nearly 1 in 10 twelfth graders reported using Vicodin® without a doctor's order within the past year.

### Youth Access to Prescription Drugs

Several reports have revealed that youth are most likely to obtain prescription drugs from their parents' medicine cabinet and from other people they know. According to the 2005 and 2006 NSDUH survey, over half of youth who were "nonmedical users" of prescription drugs said they obtained the drugs "from a friend or relative for free." This is not to say that family and friends are intentionally providing medications for misuse; however, it indicates a need for parents and caregivers to more closely monitor the prescription drugs in their homes and to limit youth access to them.

Despite the dramatic proliferation of internet sites selling prescription medication, a smaller percentage of youth are accessing prescription drugs via the internet (as compared to via their home environment or from friends). The reported rates of prescription drug access

among youth via the internet ranges from approximately 1% on the NSDUH survey to approximately 30% on the Partnership Attitude Tracking Survey (PATS).

Young abusers of prescription drugs use the Internet to share "recipes" for getting high. Some websites are so simplistic that youth refer to pills by color, rather than their brand names, content or potency. This may lead to dangerous consequences if pills are mixed in ways that can have harmful effects.

- Carol Falkowski

*Director of Research Communications for the Hazelden Foundation<sup>4</sup>*

## Other use patterns among youth

More recent trends of combining medications, ingesting larger quantities of medications, and mixing medications with other drugs fuels concerns about harmful consequences for youth. Teens use these drugs for a variety of reasons, including, getting high, partying, as study aids, and in some cases to mask feelings of anxiety, depression, or other underlying mental health concerns. A risky, new activity among some teens is "pharming." This term is used to refer to the trading of prescription/OTC medications, then ingesting the mix of pills, often with alcohol. Youth are experimenting in a number of ways. Some teens simply swallow the pills or drink liquids; others may crush the pills before snorting or smoking the powder.

"Today's kids are part of Generation Rx"

- *The Partnership for a Drug-Free America*™

Still others melt or dissolve the drugs and then inject them. Another popular way of abusing prescription drugs is to mix them with alcohol and street drugs into "cocktails." "Partying" in these ways is dangerous and often leads to more significant and sometimes fatal consequences. In 2004, overdoses of prescription and OTC drugs accounted for about one-quarter of the 1.3 million drug-related emergency room admissions (SAMHSA)<sup>3</sup>.

## Common misperceptions among youth

Of most concern among this population are their attitudes toward the misuse of prescription drugs. According to the 2005 Partnership Attitude Tracking Study (PATS)<sup>5</sup> :

- 40% of teens feel that the use of prescription drugs is safer than using illegal drugs,
- 33% of teens believe that there is “nothing wrong” with using prescription drugs without a prescription once in a while,
- 29% of teens are under the impression that prescription pain relievers are not addictive,
- 32% of teens believe they have fewer side effects than street drugs, and
- 25% of teens think prescription drugs can be used as study aids.

“It’s not like I’m taking cocaine or crack—it’s OK, these are pharmaceutical drugs made by professionals who know what they are doing.”

- Female, Indiana, as stated in the *Daily News*, Muncie, IN on Nov. 6, 2006.

## Consequences

Although many youth feel that the use of prescription drugs is safe, they can be just as dangerous as street drugs. In fact, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of poisonings and even deaths associated with the abuse of prescription drugs.<sup>6</sup> Some consequences of prescription drug abuse include:<sup>7</sup>

- Severe respiratory depression or death following a large single dose of opioids.
- Seizures following a rebound in brain activity after reducing or discontinuing use of CNS depressants.
- Dangerously high body temperature or an irregular heartbeat after taking high doses of stimulants. Stimulant abuse can also result in cardiovascular

failure or lethal seizures, and hostility or feelings of paranoia after taking high doses repeatedly over a short period of time.

The unintentional poisoning deaths involving drugs increased 113% from 1999 to 2004 among youth ages 15-24. Research suggests this is an increase attributed primarily to prescription painkillers.<sup>8</sup> In addition, emergency department patients aged 12 to 20 accounted for almost half (48%) of all the emergency department visits resulting from non-medical use of dextromethorphan (DMX), commonly found in cough and cold medications.<sup>9</sup>

## Strategies for preventing prescription drug abuse among youth in your community

The following are strategies for communities to begin to take action for detecting, interceding, and preventing prescription drug abuse among youth. Community leaders, parents, law enforcement officers, schools, and health care practitioners—such as physicians, pharmacists, and nurses, and community coalitions can all play critical roles in working towards addressing issues at the local level.<sup>10</sup>

### **Build awareness and provide information<sup>11,12</sup>**

- Organize a roundtable discussion or town hall meeting to discuss prescription drug abuse. The panel may include medical and parenting experts, school representatives, teens who are in recovery after treatment, and other parents.

A new prevention program was just launched in April, 2008 to educate teens about the serious risks of abusing prescription medications. Developed by the National Association of School Nurses (NASN), with funding from PriCara, Division of Ortho-McNeil-Janssen Pharmaceuticals, Inc., *Smart Moves, Smart Choices* includes web-based resources and a series of videos, which are part of an in-school newscast called “the.News.”

For more information about this program, visit <http://www.macneil-lehrer.com/thenews/themedic/>

Gather available data and compile questions for the panelists. Depending on the size and format, invite the audience to join the discussion or ask questions. Consider inviting local media.

Keep the following in mind when developing prescription drug prevention plans, whether you're working with parents, doctors, teachers, counselors, or teens:

- Craft messages that will resonate with the target audience.
- Be direct and succinct.
- Don't blame doctors, medications, drug companies, parents, or society.
- Try not to normalize the problem by implying that all teens are abusing these drugs.
- Be responsive to ethnic, cultural, gender, and age differences related to teenage prescription drug use.
- Identify referral resources for prevention and treatment.

- *Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America*

- Develop resources to share with your community. Resources may include online content, community call-in numbers, or printed materials, such as brochures, flyers, or posters with information and action items. Be sure to include a web site or phone number where parents can go to get help and more information, including finding appropriate prevention programs and treatment centers in the area.
- Create programs and activities during Prescription Awareness Month, held in October each year. The National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign offers a variety of resources, including print ads, to customize for your community, available at [www.TheAntiDrug.com/Resources](http://www.TheAntiDrug.com/Resources).
- Create and disseminate youth-oriented print materials on the hazards of prescription drug abuse.
- Enlist the assistance of the local police department, community coalition, and other appropriate

sources of information to present classes on the dangers of prescription drug abuse, especially among young people.

- Ensure that school-aged youth/young adults understand the rules about the use of prescription drugs in school: "Students are not allowed to self-medicate. The school nurse must administer all medications. Taking over-the-counter medications in school is restricted."
- Ensure that media coverage about a particular drug abuse problem accurately reports the facts, and tells how people can get involved in the solution.
- Maintain a directory of treatment facilities that are prepared to provide treatment services to individuals misusing or abusing prescription drugs.

### ***Encourage parental monitoring***

Past month use of illicit drugs, cigarettes, and alcohol (including binge alcohol) was lower among youths aged 12 to 17 who reported that their parents always or sometimes engaged in monitoring behaviors than among youths whose parents "seldom" or "never" engaged in such behaviors.

- *2006 National Survey on Drug Use and Health*

- Provide parent-focused information and training to entities that come in contact with parents and caregivers, including family counselors, EAP programs and business owners, pharmacists and the medical community, law enforcement officers, and educators.
- Communities can encourage parents to educate their children about the dangers of prescription drug misuse.
- Encourage parents and family members whose homes teens visit to become more aware of how they are storing medications. For example, keeping prescription medications out of teens

reach, rather than in the medicine cabinet.

- When a parent's child is prescribed medications by a doctor, encourage parents to ask if the medication has the potential for abuse. Suggest that parents take an inventory of the prescription and pay attention to its quantity.
- Educate parents about medication distribution for their child during school hours. Encourage them to speak with school officials about policies for distributing medications to students and to personally take the medications to the school nurse. Parents should also take steps to ensure that unused medications are returned to them directly.

### **Form community coalitions<sup>13</sup>**

Currently the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) has funded over 700 Drug-Free Communities (DFC) coalitions throughout the nation. Of the 700 DFC grantees, 365 work on prescription drug abuse, including education efforts to prevent abuse and the tracking of prescription drugs.<sup>14</sup>

- Bring all of the players to the table, including local health care practitioners, community health systems, law enforcement personnel, pharmaceutical companies, and families.
- Gain the support of the local school board, medical and religious communities, and the media in promoting your efforts.
- Ensure that your needs assessment process includes formal data gathering regarding prescription drug misuse and abuse among youth.
- Reinforce the importance of collaboration in all of your activities—that success depends upon a cadre of community resources working together to combat and prevent prescription drug abuse.
- Establish a memorandum of understanding (MOU) among state and local agencies to better ensure their commitment to this issue that involves pharmaceutical companies, pharmacies, and

medical professionals. Encourage these partners to come to the table and create programs and activities that address prescription drug abuse, particularly among youth.

- Be aware of resources and organizations within your community that are working on the prescription drug misuse and abuse issue and make sure you are an active part of the coalition. For example, The PAINFULLY OBVIOUS® program was developed as part of a public service campaign to raise awareness and educate parents, teachers, and students about the dangers of abusing prescription medicines. The materials are distributed at no charge to state and community-based organizations for use in their outreach efforts to address prescription drug abuse and can be downloaded at [www.painfullyobvious.com](http://www.painfullyobvious.com).

### **Conclusion**

The escalating use of prescription medications for non-medical use among youth is a great concern. Today's teens are more likely to have abused prescription and over the counter (OTC) drugs than most illicit drugs.

National and state surveys demonstrate that adolescents and young adults represent the majority of individuals who are abusing prescription drugs. In addition, this age group represents the fastest growing segment of the population abusing such drugs as Vicodin®, OxyContin®, and stimulants. Two of the most concerning aspects of the proliferation of use by youth is the ease at which they obtain these substances and the perception that since these substances were made in a laboratory, they are "safer" than drugs such as cocaine and heroin and carry less addictive potential.

The attitudes toward the misuse of prescription drugs suggest that educating the public, especially young adults and parents, could have a positive impact. At a minimum, youth should be informed about the negative consequences associated with prescription drugs as well as how some of the medications are just as or more addictive than street drugs. Furthermore, parents can be educated about the prevalence of prescription drug abuse and the means by which

many youth obtain these substances so that they can appropriately secure and dispose of their medications.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services projects U.S. prescription drug spending to increase from \$200.7 billion in 2005 to \$497.5 billion in 2016, a 148% increase in 11 years.<sup>15</sup> Such a dramatic increase indicates a parallel increase in the amount of prescription drugs available to youth. Given recent use and accessibility trends, it is a critical time for parents, caregivers, and communities to take preventative steps to educate, monitor, and limit youth access to prescription drugs.



<sup>1</sup> Prescription Drugs: Abuse and Addiction. (2005) National Institute on Drug Abuse Research Report Series. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. National Institutes of Health. <http://www.drugabuse.gov/PDF/RRPrescription.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> The Monitoring the Future Survey (MTF). (2007) The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). <http://www.drugabuse.gov/DrugPages/MTF.html>

<sup>3</sup> Emergency department visits involving nonmedical use of selected pharmaceuticals. (2004) Drug Abuse Warning Network (DAWN). Office of Applied Studies (OAS), Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). <http://dawninfo.samhsa.gov/files/TNDR07EDvisitsNonmedicalUse.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Prescription drugs find place in teen culture. June 13, 2006. USA Today. [http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2006-06-12-teens-pharm-drugs\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2006-06-12-teens-pharm-drugs_x.htm)

<sup>5</sup> The Partnership Attitude Tracking Study (PATS). (2006). The Partnership for a Drug-Free America: Teens in grades 7 through 12 2005. May 16, 2006. [http://www.drugfree.org/Files/Full\\_Teen\\_Report](http://www.drugfree.org/Files/Full_Teen_Report)

<sup>6</sup> Prescription for Danger: A Report on the Troubling Trend of Prescription and Over-the-Counter Drug Abuse Among the Nation's Teens. (2008) Office of National Drug Control Policy. Executive Office of the President. [http://www.mediacampaign.org/newsroom/press08/rx\\_rpt\\_2008.pdf](http://www.mediacampaign.org/newsroom/press08/rx_rpt_2008.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Prescription Drugs Abuse and Addiction. (2005). National Institute on Drug Abuse. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <http://www.nida.nih.gov/ResearchReports/Prescription/prescription5.html>

<sup>8</sup> Unintentional Poisoning Deaths, United States, 1999-2004. (2007) Centers for Disease Control (CDC). February 9, 2007. <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5605a1.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Emergency Department Visits Involving Dextromethorphan. (2006) The DAWN Report. Drug Abuse Warning Network. SAMHSA. <https://dawninfo.samhsa.gov/files/TNDR10DXMforHTML.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Strategizer 38. Prescription Drug Abuse Prevention: Where Do We Go From Here? Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America. <http://cadca.org/PrescriptionDrugAbuse/Strat38.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Strategizer 52. Teen Prescription Drug Abuse: An Emerging Threat. (2008). Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America. [http://www.theantidrug.com/pdfs/resources/teen-rx/CADCA\\_Strategizer52.pdf](http://www.theantidrug.com/pdfs/resources/teen-rx/CADCA_Strategizer52.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Strategizer 38. Prescription Drug Abuse Prevention: Where Do We Go From Here? Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America. <http://cadca.org/PrescriptionDrugAbuse/Strat38.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Prescription Drug Abuse Prevention Initiative Community Survey October 2001. Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America. March 2002. <http://cadca.org/PrescriptionDrugAbuse/PDAfinalsurvey.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Testimony of Dr. Bertha K. Madras, Deputy Director, Demand Reduction Office of National Drug Control Policy; the House Committee on Government Reform, Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy, and Human Resources. July 26, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Prescription Drug Trends. (2007). Kaiser Family Foundation. [http://www.kff.org/rxdrugs/upload/3057\\_06.pdf](http://www.kff.org/rxdrugs/upload/3057_06.pdf)

## Other Resources

### For parents:

[www.drugfree.org](http://www.drugfree.org)

### For teens:

[www.dxmstories.com](http://www.dxmstories.com)



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