

**Safeguard:** Third, it is crucial for everyone to learn how to safeguard their prescription drugs. Patients should **educate themselves** on the medications they are being prescribed. Ask prescribing doctors and pharmacists about the side effects and potential addictiveness of any medications prescribed, including knowing whether a drug is a narcotic, stimulant, depressant or steroid. **Read the labels** of any drugs you currently use or are prescribed to learn important information about proper use and potential side effects. Many times, generic prescriptions are substituted for brand name drugs, and patients may not be aware of the fact they have been prescribed a powerful drug with potential for abuse or addiction. **Review the contents of your medicine cabinet** so you are aware of what prescriptions you have in your home. Keep powerful drugs in a safe place—even locked up, count your pills every so often so you know how many you have, and dispose of prescription drugs when they are no longer needed.



### Additional Resources

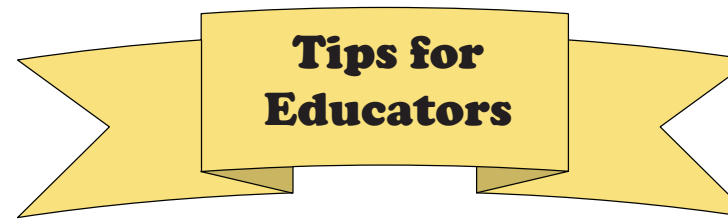
- More information on addiction to prescription drugs is available at [www.drugabuse.gov/drugpages/prescription.html](http://www.drugabuse.gov/drugpages/prescription.html)
- Information for parents on teen prescription drug abuse is available at [www.drugfree.org](http://www.drugfree.org)
- An information kit for parents, including curricula for different age groups and a community presentation for adults called "Helping Communities Respond to Rx and OTC Abuse," is available at [www.dare.com](http://www.dare.com)
- The National Institute on Drug Abuse's teen page is accessible at [www.tens.drugabuse.gov](http://www.tens.drugabuse.gov)

# Teen Prescription Drug Misuse:

## What can you do?

A compilation of resources produced by California Department of Alcohol and Drug Program's Community Prevention Initiative

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### What is Prescription Drug Misuse?

Prescription Drug Misuse (PDM) is the use of prescription medication in a way that is not prescribed by a licensed health care provider. This may include using drugs prescribed to someone else, or using prescription drugs in a way not directed by a doctor.<sup>i</sup> In recent years, there has been a steady increase in the non-medical misuse of prescription drugs by youth and teens to get high. According to the Partnership for a Drug-Free America, each day 2,500 teenagers use a prescription drug for the first time to get high.



Nearly one-third of teens (31% or 7.3 million) surveyed by the 2006 Partnership Attitude Tracking Survey (PATS) believe there is "nothing wrong" with using prescription drugs without a prescription "once in a while." Two in five teens (40% or 9.4 million) believe that these types of medications—even if not prescribed by a doctor—are "much safer" to use than illegal drugs.<sup>ii</sup>

Youth also abuse over-the-counter (OTC) medications. More than half of teens surveyed by the 2006 PATS (55% or 13 million) don't agree strongly that using cough medicines to get high is risky—and the 2007 Monitoring the Future survey showed that 4% of 8th graders, 5% of 10th graders and 7% of 12th graders took cold or cough medicines containing dextromethorphan (DXM) within the past year to get high.

### What Types of Prescription and OTC Drugs Are Most Often Misused?<sup>iii</sup>

Type	Examples	Consequences
<b>Pain Relievers</b> , also known as narcotics or opiates, which are prescribed for pain relief.	Morphine, Codeine, OxyContin® (Oxycodone), Vicodin® (Hydrocodone), Demerol® (Meperidine)	Overdose can lead to respiratory depression and death. Long-term abuse leads to physical dependence and addiction.
<b>Depressants</b> , also known as sedatives or tranquilizers, which are prescribed for anxiety or sleep difficulties	Nembutal® (pentobarbital sodium), Valium® (diazepam), Xanax® (alprazolam).	Slow down normal brain function and can cause a drowsy, uncoordinated feeling. Large doses can depress breathing and cause a coma. Long-term abuse can lead to physical dependence and addiction.
<b>Stimulants</b> , which are prescribed for hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), narcolepsy, or obesity	Ritalin® (methylphenidate), Dexedrine® (dextroamphetamine).	Elevate blood pressure and heart rate. High doses can cause dangerously high body temperature and cardiac arrest from abnormal heartbeat.
<b>Over The Counter medications</b>	Products available OTC to treat allergies and colds that contain Dextromethorphan® (DXM), diet pills, motion-sickness medication, and sleep aids	Serious harm if abused in large doses for non-medical purposes



<sup>i</sup> Misuse of Prescription Drugs Climbing in Middle and High School Students—Vital Questions and Answers for Parents, available at [http://www.health.state.ny.us/professionals/patients/medicines/prescription/abuse/parent\\_questions\\_and\\_answers.htm](http://www.health.state.ny.us/professionals/patients/medicines/prescription/abuse/parent_questions_and_answers.htm)

<sup>ii</sup> Partnership for a Drug Free America, 2006 Partnership Attitude Tracking Survey (PATS)

<sup>iii</sup> Misuse of Prescription Drugs Climbing in Middle and High School Students—Vital Questions and Answers for Parents, available at [http://www.health.state.ny.us/professionals/patients/medicines/prescription/abuse/parent\\_questions\\_and\\_answers.htm](http://www.health.state.ny.us/professionals/patients/medicines/prescription/abuse/parent_questions_and_answers.htm)

Getting Results fact sheet: "California Youths and the Abuse of Prescription and Over-the-Counter Drugs" (2009)

<sup>iv</sup> Misuse of Prescription Drugs Climbing in Middle and High School Students—Vital Questions and Answers for Parents, available at [http://www.health.state.ny.us/professionals/patients/medicines/prescription/abuse/parent\\_questions\\_and\\_answers.htm](http://www.health.state.ny.us/professionals/patients/medicines/prescription/abuse/parent_questions_and_answers.htm)

<sup>v</sup> "Generation Rx: National Study Confirms Abuse of Prescription and Over-The-Counter Drugs", Partnership for a Drug-Free America (2006).

<sup>vi</sup> "Prescription Drug Abuse Alert", New York State Department of Health, Bureau of Narcotic Enforcement (2008).

<sup>vii</sup> [www.theantidrug.com](http://www.theantidrug.com)

## Rx Drug Basics

A **prescription drug** is a drug only available by authorization from a healthcare practitioner to a pharmacist. **Over the counter** medication is one that is sold without a prescription. Both are sold with explicit instructions on their usage for medical purposes.

## How is Prescription and OTC Drug Misuse Dangerous?

Pharmaceuticals taken without a prescription or doctor's supervision are potentially just as risky as illegal drugs or binge drinking.<sup>iv</sup> As described above, serious consequences may result from prescription and OTC medication misuse, especially these drugs are used in large quantities in one sitting, or if addiction develops, over time. Greater danger is also presented when any of these drugs are combined, or are mixed with alcohol. Some youth also engage in what are called "pharm parties," where teens collect whatever prescription drugs they can find and share them with others at random—a potentially highly dangerous practice due to the unpredictability of what youth end up ingesting. Overall, the risks presented from prescription or OTC drug misuse are great—and the growing prevalence of use by youth of these drugs presents a concerning trend.

## Why Are Youth Misusing Prescription and OTC Drugs?

Similar to other drug use or abuse, experts suggest the following reasons as motivators for youth to use prescription or OTC drugs to get high<sup>vii</sup>:

- *Escape and boredom*
- *Preservation of friendships, romantic relationships, and family life*
- *Competition among peers for achievements such as college admissions and school honors*
- *Stress caused by balancing schoolwork, grades, and extracurricular activities*
- *Desire to attain the "ideal" physical appearance*



## What is the Extent of Prescription Drug Misuse by Youth?

NATIONAL	CALIFORNIA
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Nearly 1 in 5 teens (19% or 4.5 million) have tried prescription medication to get high<sup>1</sup></li><li>✓ 1 in 10 teens (10% or 2.4 million) report abusing cough medicine to get high<sup>1</sup></li><li>✓ 7 of the top 11 drugs abused by 12<sup>th</sup> graders are prescription drugs and OTC medications<sup>2</sup></li><li>✓ Past year use of narcotic pain relievers by high school seniors included nearly 1 in 10 using Vicodin® and over 5% using OxyContin® to get high<sup>2</sup></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Prescription drug use by California Youth is occurring at an alarming rate<sup>1</sup></li><li>✓ Newly collected data on OTC drugs show that many teens are taking them to get "high"<sup>1</sup></li><li>✓ 37% of 9<sup>th</sup> graders and 50% of 11<sup>th</sup> graders have used either an illicit/illegal drug or a diverted prescription drug to get high at least once in their lifetime<sup>1</sup></li><li>✓ Prescription painkillers exceed all other drugs in popularity except for marijuana among 11<sup>th</sup> graders<sup>2</sup></li></ul>

<sup>1</sup> Partnership for a Drug Free America, 2006 Partnership Attitude Tracking Survey  
<sup>2</sup> 2007 Monitoring the Future Survey

<sup>1</sup> 12<sup>th</sup> biennial California Student Survey (2007-08)  
<sup>2</sup> 11<sup>th</sup> biennial California Student Survey (2005-06)



## What Can You Do To Help?

As educators, you have a responsibility to care and act for the safety and well-being of students, and a special opportunity to promote awareness on the important issue of drug abuse. The Partnership for a Drug-Free America's National Rx and OTC Medicine Abuse Education Campaign promotes a tri-fold strategy: Educate, Communicate, and Safeguard. As someone with a close connection to youth, you should not only embody these responsibilities in your own practices, but also to convey these vital messages to youth, families, and the school and broader community.

**Educate:** It is important to know what types of medications youth are abusing, how they are getting it, and the potential

dangers involved. As someone with frequent interactions with **students**, you have the ability to warn youth about the dangers of prescription and OTC drug abuse. You may also be able to detect changes in behavior or habits that may connote a student's prescription or OTC drug abuse, and get the student help, if they need it. You also have a ready pipeline to communicate with **parents** and can educate them on this emerging practice, inform them of the potential danger involved and the importance of controlling their own prescription drugs at home, and encourage them to be wary of their own children's behavior. Use parent nights at school, newsletters or the district Web site, or PTA meetings to get the message across to parents and families. Finally, you have the ability to bring awareness to your **school** about this important issue. Encourage prevention education programs to include information about prescription and OTC drug abuse in their anti-drug messages. Encourage student assistance programs and personnel to provide prescription and OTC drug abuse prevention, education, screening and intervention services.

**Communicate:** A second component advocated by the Partnership in their efforts against prescription and OTC medicine abuse is communicating about the issue. **Inform students** that abusing prescription drugs is as dangerous and illegal as abusing street drugs, and could result in serious bodily harm or even criminal charges. It is important to **discount the idea** that these drugs are somehow less dangerous than using illicit drugs, or can be used recreationally to any degree of safety. Consider sponsoring a **social marketing campaign** at school with the help of students to inform the population about the dangers of prescription and OTC drug abuse. And, as discussed above, communicate with parents on the issue and encourage them to **talk to their children** about the problem. Parents should ask their teens what they are experiencing at school, at their friends' homes, and at parties, and should share with them the dangers of abusing prescription and OTC drugs.



## How Do Youth Obtain Prescription Drugs?

According to the 2007 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, persons aged 12 years or older who used pain relievers non-medically in the past 12 months reported obtaining the drugs in the following ways:

- 56.5% got the drug from someone they knew, and that they did not pay for it
- 18.1% obtained the drug from one doctor
- 4.1% purchased the pain reliever from a drug dealer or other stranger
- 0.5% bought the drug on the Internet

Most often, youth obtain prescription drugs from their own homes—their family members' or their own prescriptions. According to the 2005 PATS survey, more than 60% of teens say that prescription pain relievers are easy to get from parents' medicine cabinets; half of teens report that they are easy to obtain through other people's prescriptions; and more than half of teens say that pain relievers are "available everywhere."<sup>v</sup> Another survey found that one in four teens with a valid prescription have been approached by other students to share their drugs.<sup>vi</sup> Youth may also obtain prescription drugs, or gain and share information about drug use and abuse, via the Internet.