

FACT SHEET: PRESCRIPTION MEDICATION

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Each year, it's estimated over half a million teens misuse or abuse prescription drugs for the first time—and that number is continuing to increase. Prescription drugs are thought to be safer or less harmful than other kinds of drugs. However, misusing or abusing prescription drugs can have serious short and long-term health consequences.

Young people who misuse or abuse prescription drugs are at a much greater risk for using other addictive drugs such as alcohol, marijuana, heroin, ecstasy and cocaine.¹

Q & A

What is prescription drug misuse and abuse?

Prescription drug misuse is taking a medication without following the medical instructions or without a prescription. Examples include taking a higher dosage, mixing with alcohol or other drugs, or using a medication intended for a specific purpose (e.g., nausea) for something else (e.g., to alleviate a headache). Prescription abuse happens when medications are not only used inappropriately, but for the sole purpose of experiencing the feelings associated with the drug such as euphoria or relaxation.

Why do teens misuse and abuse prescription drugs?

Teens use prescription drugs for a number of reasons, such as pain relief from an injury, to deal with the pressures of life, because they like the way it makes them feel, or because they think it will help them with school work. In fact, one in four teenagers believe that prescription drugs can be used as a study aid.

Boys and girls tend to misuse prescription drugs for different reasons. Boys are more likely to take stimulants to get high, while girls try to make up for lack of sleep or to lose weight. Some young people may take prescription drugs to self-medicate when symptoms of depression or anxiety have gone untreated.²



PRESCRIPTION MEDICATION AND THE TEEN BRAIN

A young person's brain is still undergoing important development until they are in their mid 20's. Using powerful medications during this time can interfere with important brain development and may rewire the brain for addiction. Not only are teens at greater risk of becoming addicted to prescription medications, but misuse or abuse of prescription drugs also increases the risk of using and becoming dependent on other addictive substances.

EFFECTS OF COMMONLY ABUSED PRESCRIPTION MEDICATIONS



OPIOIDS

Vicodin, OxyContin, or codeine are prescribed to relieve pain and can cause drowsiness, nausea, and constipation. In 2016, 1 in 5 deaths among young people were opioid related.³



DEPRESSANTS

Valium or Xanax, are prescribed to relieve anxiety or help with sleep. They can cause slurred speech, fatigue, low blood pressure, disorientation, lack of coordination, and seizures.



STIMULANTS

Adderall and Ritalin are prescribed for treating attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). They have side effects in common with cocaine use such as paranoia, dangerously high body temperatures, an irregular heartbeat, and in high doses can cause heart failure and seizures.

These drugs are addictive because they produce a flood of dopamine – the brain's "feel good" messenger. This can damage the brain's ability to produce dopamine naturally making it harder to feel good without the drug. With continued use, a larger dose of the drug will be needed to get the same feeling.⁴

1. *National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University* (<https://www.centeronaddiction.org/>)
2. *National Institute on Drug Abuse for Teens* (<https://teens.drugabuse.gov/drug-facts/prescription-drugs>)
3. *The Truth Campaign* (<https://opioids.thetruth.com/o/the-facts/all>)
4. *National Institute on Drug Abuse for Teens* (<https://teens.drugabuse.gov/drug-facts/prescription-drugs>)
5. *Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration*
(<https://www.samhsa.gov/homelessness-programs-resources/hpr-resources/teen-prescription-drug-misuse-abuse>)