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Misuse of Prescription Drugs Climbing in Middle and High School Students - Vital Questions and Answers for Parents

The abuse of prescription drugs is quickly becoming an epidemic. They're easy to get and simple to distribute. Gone are the days when people need to go to a seedy street corner to get high. Now, they just need to go to a medicine cabinet or Grandma's purse. Courtesy of the Partnership for a Drug Free America, the Food and Drug Administration, and the National Institute on Drug Abuse, CADY is able to provide the following valuable information to the community about this growing issue. There are many misconceptions out there about the abuse of "legal" drugs and this following vital questions and answers will shed some light on this important issue.

Q: What is prescription drug abuse?

A: Prescription drug abuse is the use of prescription medication in a manner that is not prescribed by a health care practitioner. This includes using someone else's prescription or using your own prescription in a way not directed by your doctor.

Q: How big a problem is prescription drug abuse?

A: Most people take prescription medication responsibly under a doctor's care. However, there has been a steady increase in the non-medical use of these medications, especially by teenagers. Prescription drug abuse knows no boundaries; it occurs in all social, economic, geographic, and ethnic groups.

Q: At what age are teens abusing prescription medications?

A: Kids as young as 12 are trying prescription drugs to get high. Prescription drugs are often more easily available to children than illicit drugs like marijuana because they can be stolen from the medicine cabinet at home, rather than having to be bought on the streets. An added danger of abusing prescription drugs is that teens consider them safer than street drugs because they are manufactured by a pharmaceutical company.

Q: What are some of the most commonly abused prescription drugs?

A: Although any prescription drug can be abused, the three types of drugs that are most commonly abused are:

- *Pain Killers, also known as narcotic or opiates. Examples include morphine, codeine, OxyContin (oxycodone), Vicodin (hydrocodone) and Demerol (meperidine). A large single dose can cause severe respiratory depression and death. Long-term abuse leads to physical dependence and, in some cases, addiction.*
- *Depressants, which are prescribed to treat anxiety and sleep disorders. Examples are Nembutal (pentobarbital sodium), Valium (diazepam), and Xanax (alprazolam). They 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.*
- *Stimulants are often prescribed to treat attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Examples include Ritalin (methylphenidate) and Dexedrine (dextroamphetamine). These drugs elevate blood pressure and heart rate. High doses can cause dangerously high body temperature and cardiac arrest brought on by an abnormal heartbeat.*

Q: What about the abuse of over-the-counter (OTC) medications that can be bought in a store or pharmacy without a prescription?

A: OTC drugs are also abused by teens. 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. Cough syrups can be equally dangerous when teens drink them to get high.

Q: Do different age groups abuse different types of prescription medications?

A: Yes. Painkillers are the most commonly abused by teens, especially by younger teens. Stimulant abuse is more common among older teens and college students. Combining prescription drugs with alcohol makes them even more dangerous. Consumption of alcohol dramatically increases a person's potential for adverse reaction to pharmaceutical drugs.

Q: What can I do to help prevent my child from misusing prescription medications?

*A: Three important things can be done to prevent your child from misusing prescription medication - **Educate, Communicate and Safeguard.***

- *Educate yourself about medications that kids are abusing. Share this information with others who are in contact with your children; school administrators, coaches, counselors.*
- *Communicate with your kids. Discuss the subject with your teenagers. See what your kids 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 lethal. Set clear expectations with your teenagers, letting them know that under no circumstances should they ever take medications without your knowledge.*
- *Safeguard medications at home and other places. Ask your healthcare provider if any medications prescribed for your family have a potential for abuse. Take an inventory of prescription and OTC medications in your home. Pay attention to quantities. Keep medications out of reach and out of easily accessible places like the medicine cabinet. If your child needs medications during school hours, speak with school officials about policies for distributing medications to students. If possible, personally take the medications to the school nurse. Make sure unused medications are returned to you.*

Q: How can I talk to my kids about pharmaceutical medication abuse?

A: Starting a conversation about drugs with your kids is never easy, but it's also not as difficult as you may think. Take advantage of everyday opportunities and in no time at all, you'll have developed an ongoing dialogue with your child. Teachable moments are about using every day events in your life to point out things you'd like your child to know about. When you talk to your kids about drugs, make a special point to tell them how dangerous prescription medication abuse is.

Get serious now about discussing the abuse of prescription medications with your children.

Let them know:

- *Pharmaceuticals taken without a prescription or a doctor's supervision can be just as dangerous as taking illicit drugs or binge drinking.*
- *Abusing narcotic painkillers is just like abusing heroin. Both are capable of causing serious harm.*
- *Prescription medications are powerful substances. People taking medication under a doctor's care can benefit enormously; however prescription medications can have unpredictable and potentially harmful effects on people who abuse them to get high.*

For free publications and information on prescription drug issues – like how to track your medications, how to safely dispose of medications and facts about prescription drug abuse contact CADY at 536-9793 or visit our web site at www.cadyinc.org.

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