

FACT SHEET Teen Medicine Abuse

The medicine abuse problem:

Each generation of kids looks for new ways to get high. Recent trends indicate they are increasingly turning to prescription (Rx) or over-the-counter (OTC) medicines. Teens report getting many of these medicines from home medicine cabinets and mistakenly believe that abusing them is “safer” than other drugs.

According to surveys from the National Institute on Drug Abuse, 20 percent of teens say they have taken a prescription drug without having a prescription for it themselves, and 3.7 percent report abusing OTC cough medicine to get high. The Dose of Prevention Challenge urges communities to take action to address these alarming statistics by promoting education, awareness and safe medicine practices.

What types of medicines do teens abuse?

Rx Drugs: While prescription medicines benefit many different people – for many different conditions – when used appropriately, they are being increasingly misused and abused. In fact, behind only marijuana, the most common drugs teens abuse are prescription medications. The most commonly abused prescription medications are listed below, and all can be dangerous or deadly when abused:

1. Opioids and pain relievers: examples include hydrocodone (Vicodin®), oxycodone (OxyContin®)
2. Barbiturates and benzodiazepines: examples include diazepam (Valium®), alprazolam (Xanax®)
3. Stimulants: examples include dextroamphetamine (Dexedrine® or Adderall®), methylphenidate (Ritalin® or Concerta®)

OTC Cough/Cold Medicine: While millions of Americans safely rely on OTC cough medicine to temporarily relieve their cough, one in four teens knows someone who has abused OTC cough medicine to get high. Some teens intentionally take large amounts – sometimes more than 25 times the recommended dose of these medicines – to get high. This means some teens ingest multiple packages or bottles of OTC cough medicines that contain dextromethorphan (DXM).

- ◆ DXM is the active ingredient in most OTC cough medicines. Approved by the FDA in the 1950s, DXM is the most widely used cough suppressant ingredient in the United States.

- ◆ When taken in excessive amounts DXM can cause serious side effects including rapid heartbeat, high blood pressure, memory problems, nausea and vomiting.
- ◆ More than 100 OTC medicines containing DXM are on the market today. These medicines come in the form of liquids, capsules, gelcaps, lozenges, and tablets. Common DXM-containing cough medicines include many forms of Coricidin™, Delsym™, Dimetapp™, Mucinex DM™, Robitussin™, Triaminic™, Tylenol Cough & Cold™, Vicks DayQuil™/NyQuil™, Vicks Formula 44™ and more.

Help prevent medicine abuse:

TALK to your teen about prescription and OTC cough medicine abuse. Teens listen, even if they act like they don't. In fact, teens who learn about the risks of drugs from their parents are 50 percent less likely to use drugs.

SAFEGUARD your medicine cabinets. Take steps to protect your teens by safeguarding all the medicines you have in your home. Know what you have and how much, so you will know if anything is missing. Discard any medicines you no longer need.

SHARE what you have learned.

SPEAK UP at school meetings, sports events, community events and other gatherings of parents – to make sure others active in your teen's day-to-day activities know about the dangers of medicine abuse. Circulate articles via your school listserv or write an opinion editorial to your local newspaper. Blog, Facebook or Tweet about it to alert your friends and peers.

TAKE THE DOSE OF PREVENTION CHALLENGE. Host an event during the month of October 2025 to educate and spread awareness on prescription drug misuse and OTC medicine abuse. To learn more about hosting a qualifying event, visit www.doseofpreventionchallenge.org

Learn more at:
www.StopMedicineAbuse.org