

Teen Prescription Drug Abuse: Key Points for Teen Influencers

- **The latest drug of choice.** While the use of tobacco, alcohol and illicit drugs is declining overall, a new threat is emerging; more teens are abusing prescription drugs than any illicit drug, except marijuana. The misuse and abuse of prescription medications—the very same drugs used to legitimately relieve pain, and treat conditions like anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, or ADHD in some people—is a growing and under-recognized problem that puts young lives at risk.
 - 1 in 5 teens (or 4.5 million) has deliberately abused these drugs.
 - 1 in 3 teens surveyed says there is “nothing wrong” when using prescription drugs “every once and a while.”
 - Every day, 2,500 youth (12-17 years old) abuse a prescription pain reliever for the very first time.
- **Prescription drugs are readily available and free.** It’s easy for teens to get their hands on prescription drugs. The abuse of prescription drugs can start at the nearest medicine cabinet. The majority of teens get prescription drugs from friends or relatives by stealing, buying or simply asking for them. Some teens also get these drugs from strangers, including drug dealers, or by purchasing them online through pro-drug or rogue Internet pharmacies.
- **The most commonly used prescription drugs are:**
 - *Opioid analgesics* (for example, Vicodin, OxyContin, Percocet, methadone) that are used to relieve pain; they work by blocking pain messages from reaching the brain;
 - *Stimulants* (for example, Ritalin, Concerta, Adderall) that are used to treat anxiety, tension, panic attacks, and sleep disorders; these medications slow down or “depress” the functions of the brain and central nervous system; and
 - *Sedatives/tranquilizers* (for example, Valium, Xanax, Ativan, Klonopin, Ambien) that are used to treat narcolepsy, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and other conditions; these drugs speed up brain activity causing increased alertness, attention, and energy that come with elevated blood pressure, increased heart rate and breathing.
- **It’s not just about getting high.** Unlike other forms of adolescent drug use, the desire to feel good or get high ranks much lower as a motivation for prescription drug misuse. More often, teens are turning to prescription drugs to help manage their daily lives—for example, to lower stress and anxiety, boost their mood or increase stamina. According to the 2007 Partnership for a Drug-Free America Attitude Tracking Study, teens believe that the number one reason for using these drugs is to deal with the pressures and stress of school (For more information, see *Why Teens Turn to Prescription Drugs*).
- **Teens and teen influencers often don’t understand the true risk.** While parents and other teen influencers are aware of the danger of alcohol, smoking and illicit street drugs, they are less informed or concerned about prescription or over-the-counter medicines. The misuse of prescription drugs is every bit as dangerous as abusing other substances. Misusing these drugs or taking any without a prescription can have dangerous and perhaps deadly results.

- **Talking works.** Teens who consistently learn about the risks of prescription drugs at home are half as likely as their peers to try or use these and other drugs. Yet, only one in three parents talks with their teen about the dangers of prescription drugs. We know talking works. Rates of tobacco, alcohol and illicit drug abuse by teens have declined dramatically in the last decade due, in large part, to collective efforts of the anti-drug and prevention communities. History has shown that as the perception of risk goes up, teens' willingness to abuse or a misuse substance goes down. Educating them about the true dangers of prescription drug abuse in an interactive, compelling way is critical. (For more information about dispelling myths, see *Myth Busters*).

Back to Basics: Medication Safety

When taken correctly, prescription (and over-the-counter) drugs can go a long way to help relieve symptoms, fight certain infections and even improve the functioning and quality of life of those with common chronic illnesses such as arthritis, cancer, hypertension, heart disease, diabetes or depression. But, when they are misused or taken without a prescription, the consequences can be devastating and even deadly.

It's important for teen influencers to communicate with teens about the value of prescription drugs when they are used by the right person, at the right dose, at the right time and in the right way. Prescription drugs are only safe to use at the dose they've been prescribed *for you* by a doctor who knows *your health history*.

Still, educating teens about the risks of prescription drug abuse is only one piece of the puzzle. Parents, grandparents and other adults can help stop prescription drug abuse where it starts. Mobilize your community to take steps to safeguard medications.

Anyone who has teens living or possibly visiting in their household—parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, family friends—should:

- **Monitor** all medications in the home—prescription and over-the-counter medicines. Count the pills and check for missing medicine.
- **Safely store** medicines out of children's reach and sight. This should be a dry, cool place. Consider locking them up if necessary.
- **Properly dispose** of old or unused medicines. Most prescriptions drugs can be placed in a non-see-through container mixed with dirt or kitty litter and thrown in the garbage. Be sure to consult your pharmacist or the drug information accompanying your prescription as certain controlled substances should be flushed down the toilet.

For more information, go to www.smartrxdisposal.net, www.bemedwise.org, www.learnaboutrxsafety.org.

Sources: Partnership for a Drug-Free America, Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America, Nemours Foundation, SAMHSA, NCPIE.