

Warning Signs and Symptoms of Prescription Drug Abuse

Because teens are misusing and abusing so many different types of prescription drugs—from stimulants and painkillers to anti-depressants and anti-seizure drugs—it can be difficult to know what signs to watch for. Each drug has different effects, and mixing these drugs—which some teens do at “pharming” or “bowling” parties—is very dangerous and can lead to permanent organ damage and even death. And they aren’t just swallowing pills. Teens are also abusing prescription drugs by combining them with alcohol and/or crushing pills and then snorting or injecting them to get a quicker, more intense high.

Know the signs that may point to prescription drug abuse. Be observant and intervene early if you think your child, student or patient may have a problem with prescription drugs or other substances.

Physical Signs and Symptoms

Depending on the drug misused or abused you may notice the following.

Stimulants (medications used to speed up brain activity causing increased alertness, attention, and energy that comes with elevated blood pressure, increased heart rate and breathing)

- Hyperactivity
- Shaking
- Sweating
- Dilated pupils
- Fast or irregular heart beat
- Elevated body temperature
- Seizures
- Paranoia/nervousness
- Repetitive behaviors
- Loss of appetite or sudden and unexplained weight loss

Sedatives/depressants (medications used to slow down or “depress” the functions of the brain and central nervous system)

- Loss of coordination
- Respiratory depression
- Slowed reflexes
- Slurred speech
- Coma

Opioid analgesics (medications used to treat moderate-to-severe pain)

- Sleep deprivation or “nodding”
- Pinpoint/constricted pupils, watery or droopy eyes
- Nausea, vomiting, constipation
- Slow slurred speech

- Slow gait
- Dry skin, itching, skin infections
- Constant flu-like symptoms
- Track marks (bruised skin around injection sites)

Behavioral Signs

Behavior changes may include:

- Sudden mood changes, including irritability, negative attitude, personality change
- Extreme changes in groups of friends or hangout locations
- Forgetfulness or clumsiness
- Lying or being deceitful, unaccounted time away from home/missed school days, avoiding eye contact
- Losing interest in personal appearance, extracurricular activities or sports
- "Munchies" or sudden changes in appetite
- Unusually poor performance in school, on the field, in debate club or other activities
- Borrowing money or having extra cash
- Acting especially angry or abusive, or engaging in reckless behavior
- Visiting pro-drug websites

Prescription Drugs Most Commonly Abused by Teens

	Used medically to	Abused by teens to	Drug names
Pain medications	Treat moderate-to-severe pain	Feel pleasure or increase sensations of well-being	Vicodin (hydrocodone), OxyContin (oxycodone), Percocet (oxycodone and acetaminophen), Actiq (fentanyl), Darvon (propoxyphene), codeine, morphine, methadone <i>Street names: Captain Cody, China Girl, hillbilly heroin, oxy 80s, percs, demmies.</i>
Stimulants	Treat attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), narcolepsy; short-term treatment of obesity. Increases the amounts of circulating brain chemicals that raise	Increase mental alertness and concentration—perhaps around final exams or to manage coursework, get high, or lose weight.	Ritalin, Concerta, Adderall, Focalin, Dexedrine <i>Street names: uppers, vitamin R, Skippy</i>

	blood pressure and heart rate, speed up breathing, decrease appetite and deprive sleep.		
Sedatives/Tranquilizers	Treat anxiety, severe stress, panic attacks, insomnia and some types of seizure disorders or muscle spasms.	Feel calm, at peace or drowsy; reduce stress or inhibitions.	Valium, Xanax, Ativan, Klonopin, Restoril, Ambien, Lunesta, Mebaral, Nembutal <i>Street names: candy, downers, tranks, barbs</i>

Sources: *The Partnership for a Drug-Free America, National Institute on Drug Abuse, Twombly & Holtz, 2008.*

All of these drugs can be addictive and cause serious withdrawal symptoms when stopped. Combinations of these drugs or if paired with alcohol or other substances can result in permanent organ damage or premature death.

If you or someone you know takes any of these or other prescription medications, make sure to keep them safely stored and out of children’s sight. Properly dispose of any unused or expired pills. If you notice that pills or bottles are missing, take the necessary steps to talk with your teens and provide supportive counsel.

For more information, download the Partnership for a Drug-Free America’s information sheet that details the top 13 drugs teens are abusing by visiting http://www.timetotalk.org/Downloads/ttt_drug_chart.pdf.

Help is Available

If you suspect a teen is abusing prescription drugs, there is help.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT)

240-276-2750

www.csat.samhsa.gov

SAMHSA’s National Helpline

800-662-HELP (800-662-4357) (English and Spanish)

800-487-4889 (TDD)

Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator:

240-276-2548

www.samhsa.gov/treatment