

# Harmless High or Dangerous Drugs?

## The growing threat of prescription and OTC drug abuse

By Manju Batmanathan

The drug of choice is right in your home – readily available and easily accessible. From cough syrup, cold remedies, painkillers to anti-depressants, the “medicine cabinet” is the new drug-dealer, dispensing dozens of licit drugs that can lead to fatal results. Increasing numbers of teens and adults are intentionally abusing prescription (Rx) and over-the-counter (OTC) drugs, mainly because they are accessible and not illegal to possess.

The 2006 *Partnership Attitude Tracking Study (PATS)* conducted by The Partnership for a Drug-Free America reveals alarming trends that one in five teens is abusing prescription medications while one in 10 teens is getting high on over-the-counter cold and cough medicines. Kids as young as 12 years old are “self-medicating” with Rx and OTC drugs that they find at home.

Kristin Chittick, community coalition director of CAMA, Inc., a Central Illinois-based coalition against methamphetamine abuse, says prescription drug abuse is also high among teens and adults who use street drugs.

“The appeal is that you don’t have to go far to get them. You don’t have to hang around the street corner or be seen with shady characters.” Many teens perceive Rx medication as safer than narcotics because they are doctor-prescribed.

“The challenge here is to keep both teens and parents informed about the dangers of prescription and OTC

medication abuse,” she adds. “In my opinion, parents aren’t taking this as seriously as they do other forms of drug abuse and addiction.” Chittick says many parents ignore the danger that lurks in their homes as they struggle to keep their children drug-free outside of home.

The 2006 PATS survey confirms Chittick’s observation. The study shows an increasing number of parents think prescription medication abuse is safer than the use of illegal drugs. On average, parents are a third less likely to discuss the risks of Rx and OTC abuse with their children. However 54 percent of parents do discuss dangers of street drugs such as cocaine, heroin and marijuana.

*“Communication between parents and kids is the most effective prevention tool when it comes to protecting your teen from abusing medications. Kids who report learning ‘a lot’ about the dangers of drugs at home are up to 50 percent less likely to use illicit drugs.”*

Steve Pasierb, Partnership for a Drug-Free America.

### Close-Call

The culture of “pharming” where teens mix-it-up by ingesting a combination of prescription pills, alcohol and OTC medications is common and done in casual settings such as study groups after school, says Ben (real name withheld upon

request), a 17-year-old Edgar County teen. "Parents are not worried when they see a bunch of kids hanging out together at home; in fact they prefer that to us wandering outside of our homes."

An honor student, athlete, and popular among teachers and students, Ben had a promising future until he almost overdosed on a cocktail of beer, Benadryl and an anti-depressant prescription drug known as *Lexapro*.

"A couple of buddies and I were playing videogames at home, hanging out, eating pizza and experimenting with pills," he says while describing his near-death experience. "My parents were upstairs. One of the kids snuck some beer, pills and I took some allergy stuff that made you sleepy from the medicine cabinet. We were just trying to get a little buzz."

Overcome by violent convulsions and intense vomiting, Ben was rushed to the emergency room where doctors informed his parents of their son's true condition. "My parents thought I was suffering from food poisoning."

While the close-call serves as a reminder for Ben, he says many teens continue to abuse medication. "Kids even do it at school, like crush pills and mix it with their Gatorade or Kool-Aid," he adds. "It's all around us."

## Rx Trends

The 2005 National Survey on Drug Use and Health identifies the most commonly abused prescription drugs as:

1. Prescription pain relievers (*Codeine, OxyContin, Percocet, Vicodin*)
2. Prescription stimulants (*Adderall, Ritalin*)
3. Tranquilizers and sedatives (*Xanax, Valium*)

The most commonly abused OTC drug is cough syrup (*Robitussin, NyQuil LiquiCaps, Dimetapp DM*) which contains an active ingredient known as dextromethorphan (DXM), and when consumed in large doses can produce a "high" feeling and dangerous side-effects.

According to the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), teenage girls are more likely to abuse prescription drugs to get high than boys. Nearly one in 10 teenage girls report using antidepressants or tranquilizers to help them deal with adolescent issues such as weight loss, stress and to boost self-esteem. Only one in 13 boys abuse prescription medications. Officials also say more than 55 percent of emergency room cases resulting from prescription drug abuse involve female patients.

## Preventing Abuse

Chittick says in rural communities, where alcohol and meth abuse is high, prescription and OTC drug abuse recently has surfaced. "It's in the beginning stages – where the issue is just now being brought to light," she says. "That's why we need

more information to let parents and teens know what they can do to avoid prescription medication abuse."

Chittick fears that without the right information and awareness of the dangers of prescription and OTC drug abuse, more teens will fall victim to prescription drug abuse and its serious consequences.

The Partnership for a Drug-Free America offers a three-fold message to parents and adults who work with youth: educate, communicate and safeguard teens against the dangers of Rx and OTC medications.

**Educate** - Learn about the medications that kids are abusing and share the information with others including school administrators, counselors and friends.

**Communicate** - Discuss Rx and OTC drug abuse with teens. Ask what they know about the issue. Convey a clear message that any drugs, street or prescription, are dangerous and that they should not take medication without parental consent.

**Safeguard** - Take and keep inventory of Rx and OTC medications in the medicine cabinet and, if possible, keep them out of children's reach.

For more information on prescription drug and OTC abuse trends and prevention, visit:

The Partnership for a Drug-Free America at [drugfree.org](http://drugfree.org)  
The Office of National Drug Control Policy at [whitehousedrugpolicy.gov](http://whitehousedrugpolicy.gov)

## Proper Disposal of Medication

In February 2007, ONDCP issued new federal guidelines for the proper disposal of unused or expired prescription drugs:

- Take unused, expired or unneeded prescription drugs out of their original containers.
- Mix prescription drugs with undesirable substance, such as coffee grounds or kitty litter and place in non-descript containers such as sealable bags or empty cans. Make sure they are safe from children or pets.
- Dispose these containers in the trash.
- Flush prescription drugs down the toilet **only if** patient information specifically instructs it is safe to do so.
- Return unused or expired prescription drugs to pharmaceutical take-back locations that allows public to bring unused drugs to a central location for safe disposal.