

# SUBSTANCE ABUSE PREVENTION

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

**PREVENTION FIRST**  
Building community capacity to prevent substance abuse

### FACT SHEET

## PRESCRIPTION DRUGS: *JUST THE FACTS*

### What are Prescription Drugs?

Prescription Drugs are medicines which can be dispensed to the public only with an order given by a properly authorized person. The designation of a medication as a prescription drug is made by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) defines prescription drug misuse as the intentional or unintentional use of medication without a prescription (taking someone else's medicine) or in a way other than prescribed (higher doses, combined with other drugs or alcohol, or via different routes of administration). Three classes of prescription drugs are most commonly misused:

- Opioids (usually prescribed to treat pain) which include drugs such as Hydrocodone (Vicodin), Oxycodone (OxyContin) and Meperidine (Demerol)
- Central Nervous System Depressants (used to treat anxiety and sleep disorders) which include drugs such as Diazepam (Valium) and Alprazolam (Xanax)
- Stimulants (most often prescribed to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder- ADHD) including Dextroamphetamine (Dexedrine), Methylphenidate (Ritalin) and Amphetamines (Adderall).

### Illinois Data

In Illinois, prescription drug use without a prescription is more prevalent among Illinois youth than past year use of any illicit drug (excluding marijuana). Among 12th grade students, use of prescription drugs without a prescription was the fourth most common drug behavior, while among 8th and 10th grade students it was the third. In fact, more 8th and 10th graders report prescription drug use without a prescription (5.4% and 9.2%) in the past year than report using cigarettes in the same time frame (4.9% and 8.9% respectively).<sup>1</sup>

Additional insights from the 2014 Illinois Youth Survey:

- Illinois youth perceive using prescription drugs without a prescription as risky behavior at all grade levels. In comparison with risk perceptions associated with other drugs, youth generally viewed teen misuse of prescription drugs as less risky than cigarette smoking but riskier than alcohol and marijuana use.
- Prescription drugs (without a prescription) are perceived as harder to access than alcohol, cigarettes or marijuana among 10th and 12th graders. However, eighth and tenth grade students who reported using prescription drugs without a prescription report most frequently getting prescription drugs from parents (53.5% and 44.2%), while 12th graders report most frequently purchasing from someone (52.2%).

### Consequences of Prescription Drug Misuse

When prescription drugs are taken as directed from a physician, they are usually safe. However, misuse of prescription drugs comes with significant dangers.



Prevention First  
2800 Montvale Drive  
Springfield, IL 62704

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## Health

- Misusing opioids like oxycodone and codeine can cause you to feel sleepy, sick to your stomach, and constipated. At higher doses, opioids can make it hard to breathe properly and can cause overdose and death.
- Misusing depressants like barbiturates can cause slurred speech, shallow breathing, sleepiness, disorientation, and lack of coordination. People who abuse depressants regularly and then stop suddenly may experience seizures. At higher doses, depressants can also cause overdose and death, especially when combined with alcohol.
- Misusing stimulants like Adderall or Ritalin can make you feel paranoid (feeling like someone is going to harm you even though they aren't). It also can cause your body temperature to get dangerously high and make your heart beat too fast. This is especially likely if stimulants are taken in large doses or in ways other than swallowing a pill.

The misuse of prescription drugs increases a person's risk for developing a substance use disorder. According to the current Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, substance use disorders are patterns of symptoms resulting from use of a substance which the individual continues to take, despite experiencing problems as a result. Substance use disorders span a wide variety of problems arising from substance use, and are currently diagnosed on a continuum from mild to severe.<sup>2</sup>

## Legal

Using prescription drugs without a doctor's prescription is illegal in all 50 states. As prescription drugs are considered 'controlled substances' just like cocaine or heroin, criminal offences would apply just as they would these street drugs. The effects of prescription drugs can jeopardize motor functioning leaving a person at an increased risk of behaving in ways that ordinarily he/she would not. If caught, consequences can include fines and possibly jail time. For example, operating a motor vehicle while misusing prescription drugs could result in a DUI (Driving Under the Influence).<sup>3</sup>

## Other Drug Use

Data gathered from 2002 to 2012 reveal the incidence of heroin initiation was 19 times greater for those who reported prior nonmedical use of pain relievers than those who did not. This rate represents a shift from historical trends. Of people entering treatment for heroin addiction who began abusing opioids in the 1960's, more than 80% started with heroin. Of those who started abusing heroin in the 2000's, 75% reported that their first opioid was a prescription drug.<sup>4</sup>

## Resources/Tools

- National Institute on Drug Abuse- Drug Facts: Prescription Drugs – Provides information on facts regarding prescription drug use and abuse Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- Illinois Environmental Protection Agency – Provides prescription drug disposal options
- Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) – Free drug fact sheets, pamphlets, programs and materials for educators.
- NIDA for Teachers – Free lesson plans and activities for educators
- NIDA for Teens – Free resources for teens featuring videos, games, blog posts and more.

## References

1. Center for Prevention Research and Development. (2015). Illinois Youth Survey 2014 State Report. Champaign, IL: CPRD, Institute of Government and Public Affairs, University of Illinois.
2. American Psychiatric Association: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition. Arlington, VA, American Psychiatric Association, 2013.
3. Narconon Drug Rehabilitation. Legal Consequences of Drug Abuse. Web. December 2016.
4. Muhuri PK, Gfroerer JC, Davies MC; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Associations of Nonmedical Pain Reliever Use and Initiation of Heroin Use in the United States. CBHSQ Data Review. Published August 2013.

## Where Prevention Strategies Can Make a Difference

The following are examples of how prevention specialists can use information about prescription drug misuse into three evidenced-based prevention strategies - Youth Prevention Education, Parent/Family Education and Mentoring.

### Youth Prevention Education (YPE)

Youth prevention education curricula and skill-building programs are designed to address internal and external pressures and to educate on the short-term harm and risks associated with alcohol, tobacco and other drug use.

- For younger students, provide practice sessions on how to refuse candy/unknown items, such as prescription drugs, from those other than parents.
- Provide developmentally-appropriate information sheets about the dangers of prescription drug misuse for school-age youth.
- Conduct an in-service workshop for teachers/staff at the school where you are teaching a YPE curriculum about signs/symptoms of prescription drug misuse and resources for referring students for assistance.
- Provide information about prescription drug misuse to parents/guardians of youth in the YPE class.

Useful Links:

- <https://www.cia.gov/kids-page/parents-teachers/helping-them-say-no-to-drugs>
- <http://teens.drugabuse.gov/drug-facts/prescription-drugs/>
- <https://www.drugabuse.gov/free-resources-teachers-high-school/>
- <https://www.justthinktwice.gov>
- <https://teens.drugabuse.gov/>

### Parent/Family Education

Background research from the Center of Prevention Research and Development shows that protective and risk factors within the family domain can greatly influence youth's initiation into ATOD use, the trajectory of that use, and its prevention or mitigation. Despite this, families are not always equipped with the information, skills and parenting strategies needed that promote healthy lifestyle choices. Parent/Family Education programs can help address these issues. Below are examples of resources to add to an evidence-based Parent/Family Education program.

- Provide tip sheets on how parents can talk to their child about the dangers of misusing prescription drugs, including activities that enhance communication.
- Provide strategies outlining how adults can secure medicine safely in the house.
- Provide information about safe disposal and local drug 'take back' programs.
- Provide opportunities for parents and families to practice talking to their child about prescription drug misuse.

Useful Links:

- <http://store.samhsa.gov/product/Talking-to-Your-Kids-About-Prescription-Drug-Abuse-Not-Worth-the-Risk-for-Parents-/SMA12-4676B1>
- <http://store.samhsa.gov/product/Keeping-Youth-Drug-Free/SMA-3772>
- [https://www.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/drug\\_disposal/takeback/](https://www.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/drug_disposal/takeback/)
- <http://ncapda.org/>

### Mentoring

Mentoring is a structured one-on-one relationship between an adult and young person that can be particularly effective during major developmental life transitions. Resources for adult mentors can be provided during orientation/training sessions as well as throughout the mentoring experience.

- Conduct an orientation/training session for mentors specific to the risks associated with prescription drug misuse.
- Provide tip sheets to mentors on how to talk with youth mentees about the dangers of using someone else's medication.
- Provide opportunities for mentors to practice conversations with their mentee about prescription drug misuse.
- Provide information to mentors on signs and consequences of prescription drug misuse.

Useful Links:

- <http://store.samhsa.gov/product/Helping-Students-Avoid-Prescription-Drug-Abuse/SMA09-4446>
- <http://www.narconon.org/drug-abuse/signs-symptoms-prescription-drug-use.html>