

California Youths and the Abuse of Prescription and Over-the-Counter Drugs

Although overall drug use by youths had decreased dramatically since the mid-1990s, there is increasing youth abuse of prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) medications. The current cohort of middle- and high-school-age youths is being dubbed "Generation Rx."

How Common Is Prescription and OTC Drug Abuse by Youths?

The question has only recently been asked of students. A question about the use of prescription painkillers was added to the most recent (2005–06) California Student Survey (CSS). The 11th biennial CSS described as disconcerting the high use rate of painkillers by California's youths and called for a new focus on who is using those drugs, how they are obtained, and how prescription-drug use is related to other problems.

In California during 2005–06:

- Prescription painkillers exceeded all other drugs in popularity except for marijuana among eleventh-graders.¹
- Lifetime use of painkillers among seventh-graders was 4 percent, rising to 9 percent among ninth-graders and to 15 percent among eleventh-graders.²
- In comparison, lifetime use of any drug (marijuana, inhalants, painkillers, methamphetamine, Ecstasy, psychedelics) was 16 percent among seventh-graders, 30 percent among ninth-graders, and 45 percent among eleventh-graders.³
- Users of painkillers were more likely to be students who:
 - Used marijuana weekly in ninth grade (3 or more times more likely)
 - Used marijuana weekly in eleventh grade (2.5–3 times more likely)
 - Had been high seven or more times
 - Like to get high on drugs
 - Are more likely to be identified as high-risk drug users⁴

The 2002 national survey Monitoring the Future was the first to ask students about their use of painkillers. The 2006 survey included a new question on the use of OTC medications. The Partnership for a Drug-Free America added one question on painkillers to its 2003 national survey and one each on the use of OxyContin, Vicodin, and OTC medications in 2004.

In a 2006 national survey:

- Use of Vicodin over the past year was 3 percent among eighth-graders, 7 percent among tenth-graders, and 9.7 percent among twelfth-graders.⁵
- Use of OxyContin nearly doubled among eighth-graders (from 1.3 percent in 2002 to 2.6 percent in 2006); although, among twelfth-graders, it dropped from 5.5 percent in 2002 to 4.3 percent in 2006.⁶
- Nonmedical use of cough medicine among eighth-, tenth-, and twelfth-graders was 4 percent, 5 percent, and 7 percent, respectively.⁷

How Does the Abuse of Prescription and Over-the-Counter Drugs Impact Youths?

Prescription medications that teens abuse include painkillers, tranquilizers, sleeping pills, and stimulants. The types of prescription drugs and effects on users are shown below.⁸

Types and Effects of Prescription Drug Use

Drug Type	Purpose	Effects
Opioids: OxyContin, Percodan, Vicodin, Darvon, Dilaudid, Demerol, Lomotil	Prescribed to treat pain	Short-term: Euphoria and feelings of well-being; drowsiness, constipation, slowed breathing. Large single dose can cause slowed respiration and death. Long-term: Dependence, addiction with subsequent withdrawal symptoms.
Sedatives: Mebarol, Nembutol, Valium, Librium, Xanax	Prescribed for sleep disorders, anxiety, tension, panic attacks	Short-term: Euphoria, slurred speech, shallow breathing, sluggishness, fatigue, disorientation, lack of coordination. High doses cause impairment of memory and judgment, irritability, and paranoid and suicidal thoughts. Long-term: Dependence and withdrawal symptoms, including seizures.
Stimulants: Dexadrine, Ritalin	Prescribed for narcolepsy and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder	Short-term: Increased alertness, attention, energy, and sense of euphoria. Increased blood pressure and heart rate, constriction of blood vessels, increase in blood glucose, and increased breathing. Long-term: Addiction; high doses can lead to feelings of paranoia or hostility, dangerously high body temperatures, irregular heartbeat, heart attack, or lethal seizures.

The primary type of OTC medication that teens are abusing is cough and cold medications that contain Dextromethorphan, or DXM. Other drugs that are misused include diet pills, motion-sickness medication, and sleep aids.

Categories and Effects of OTC Drug Abuse ^{9, 10}

Drug Type	Effects
Cough and cold medications containing Dextromethorphan (DXM) include Robitussin, Nyquil, Vicks Formula 44, and Coricidin HBP Cough and Cold. DXM is chemically similar to morphine and is contained in over 120 cough and cold medications.	High doses can cause hallucinations, confusion, dizziness, double or blurred vision, abdominal pain, nausea and vomiting, numbness of fingers and toes, rapid heartbeat, high blood pressure, agitation, loss of muscle control, and/or psychosis.
Diet pills: Appetite suppressants such as Didrex, Tenuate, Tepanil, Pondimin, Sanorex, Mazanor, Bontril, Prelu-2, Pelgine, Ionamine, AdipexP. They are similar to amphetamines.	Some contain stimulants or diuretics that can cause high blood pressure, irregular heart rate, sleep problems, nervousness, seizures, and death. Excessive weight loss is also dangerous.
Sleep aids: Advil PM, Tylenol PM, Excedrin PM, Sominex	Extreme drowsiness is one effect and can lead to narcolepsy. In some people it is a stimulant and disrupts sleep.
Motion-sickness medications: Dramamine	Large doses can cause hallucinations.

What Can Schools Do?

Teens have finally gotten the message that illicit drugs, tobacco, and alcohol are harmful to their health. However, because there has been little information about the damaging effects of the nonmedical use of legal drugs, youths assume they are safe:

- Two of five teens (40 percent) think that prescription medicines are “much safer” to use than illegal drugs.
- Nearly one-third of teens (31 percent) believe there is “nothing wrong” with using prescription medications without a prescription “once in a while.”
- Nearly three of 10 teens (29 percent) believe prescription painkillers are not addictive.
- More than half of teens (55 percent) do not think that using cough medicines to get high is risky.

In addition, teens say that prescription pain relievers are easy to obtain. Painkillers are accessible:

- From parents’ medicine cabinets (three of five teens)
- Through other people’s prescriptions (50 percent of teens)
- Everywhere (more than half of teens)¹¹

Pain relievers such as Vicodin, stimulants such as Adderall, or sedatives such as Xanax can be obtained without prescription over the Internet. Numerous Web sites sell various prescription drugs delivered in unmarked packaging without requiring an actual prescription.¹²

Education and awareness. Teachers and administrators need to be educated about the general prevalence of prescription and OTC drug abuse among teens and how to recognize the signs of abuse among their students.

The school’s drug prevention programs should include information about the harmful effects of prescription and OTC drug abuse. Using a drug intended to treat a medical condition in order to get high is drug abuse. This fact should be made clear.

Schools can inform parents of the potential for abuse of prescription and OTC drugs and can encourage them to keep medications hidden rather than in medicine cabinets. Parents can ask their local pharmacies to place medications containing DXM behind the counter so they are less accessible. Resources for parents are included in the section below.

Drug policies. Schools should include the abuse of prescription and OTC drugs in the school's drug policy and consistently enforce the policy.

Resources

The Partnership for a Drug-Free America. <http://www.drugfree.org>

This site contains data from the national survey of teen drug use and attitudes and information on prescription and OTC drug use among youths. The partnership has a new prevention and education campaign for parents about teen abuse of prescription and OTC medications.

National Institute on Drug Abuse "Parents and Teachers" Web page.

<http://www.nida.nih.gov/parent-teacher.html>

This site offers educational materials for parents and teachers.

National Association of School Nurses. <http://www.nasn.org/>

This site has resources that are free of charge for school nurses and teachers to educate teens about the serious risks of abusing prescription medicines.

Endnotes

¹California Attorney General's Office, Crime and Prevention Center. (2008). *Eleventh biennial California student survey 2005-06*. Sacramento: California Attorney General's Office, Crime and Violence Center.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴WestEd (2006). *2005-06 California student survey brief 3: Marijuana and other illicit drug use*. Los Alamitos, Calif.: WestEd.

⁵National Institute on Drug Abuse (2006). *Monitoring the future study*. Washington, D.C.: National Institutes of Health, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸National Institute on Drug Abuse (2006). *NIDA InfoFacts: Prescription pain and other medications*. Washington, D.C.: National Institutes of Health, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services.

⁹The Partnership for a Drug-Free America (2006). *What every parent needs to know about cough medicine abuse*. <http://www.drugfree.org>

¹⁰Over-the-Counter Drug Abuse. <http://www.teendrugabuse.us>

¹¹The Partnership for a Drug-Free America (2006). *Generation Rx: National study confirms abuse of prescription and over-the-counter drugs*. <http://www.drugfree.org>

¹²The Partnership for a Drug-Free America (2006). *Getting high on prescription drug and over-the-counter drugs is dangerous*. <http://www.drugfree.org>