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Why Do Some People Abuse Prescription Drugs?

Some people experiment with prescription drugs because they think they will help them have more fun, lose weight, fit in, and even study more effectively.

Prescription drugs can be easier to get than street drugs: Family members or friends may have them. But prescription drugs are also sometimes sold on the street like other illegal drugs.

A 2009 survey from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows that prescription drug abuse is on the rise, with 20% of teens saying they have taken a prescription drug without a doctor's prescription.

Which Drugs Are Abused?

The most commonly used prescription drugs fall into three classes:

1. Opioids
2. Central Nervous System (CNS) Depressants

3. Stimulants

Over-the-Counter Drugs

Some people mistakenly think that prescription drugs are more powerful because you need a prescription for them. But it's possible to abuse or become addicted to over-the-counter (OTC) medications, too.

For example, dextromethorphan (DXM) is found in some OTC cough medicines.

When someone takes the number of teaspoons or tablets that are recommended, everything is fine. But high doses can cause problems with the senses (especially vision and hearing) and can lead to confusion, stomach pain, numbness, and even hallucinations.

What Are the Dangers of Abusing Medications?

Whether they're using street drugs or medications, drug abusers often have trouble at school, at home, with friends, or with the law. The likelihood that someone will commit a crime, be a victim of a crime, or have an accident is higher when that person is abusing drugs — no matter whether those drugs are medications or street drugs.

Probably the most common result of prescription drug abuse is addiction. People who abuse medications can become addicted just as easily as if they were taking street drugs. The reason many drugs have to be prescribed by a doctor is because some of them are quite addictive. That's one of the reasons most doctors won't usually renew a prescription unless they see the patient — they want to examine the patient to make sure he or she isn't getting addicted.

How Do I Know if I'm Addicted?

Many different signs can point to drug addiction. The most obvious is feeling the need to have a particular drug or substance. Changes in mood, weight, or interests are other signs of drug addiction.

If you think you — or a friend — may be addicted to prescription drugs, talk to your doctor, school counselor, or nurse. They can help you get the help you need.

It's especially important for someone who is going through withdrawal from a CNS depressant to speak with a doctor or seek medical treatment. Withdrawal can be dangerous when it's not monitored.

Tips for Taking Prescription Medication

What if a doctor prescribed a medication for you and you're worried about becoming addicted? If you're taking the medicine the way your doctor told you to, you can relax: Doctors know how much medication to prescribe so that it's just enough for you. In the correct amount, the drug will relieve your symptoms without making you addicted.

If a doctor prescribes a pain medication, stimulant, or CNS depressant, follow the directions exactly. Here are some other ways to protect yourself:

- Keep all doctor's appointments. Your doctor will want you to visit often so he or she can monitor how well the medication is working for you and adjust the dose or change the medication as needed. Some medications must be stopped or changed after a while so that the person doesn't become addicted.
- Make a note of the effects the drug has on your body and emotions, especially in the first few days as your body gets used to it. Tell your doctor about these.
- Keep any information your pharmacist gives you about any drugs or activities you should steer clear of while taking your prescription. Reread it often to

remind yourself of what you should avoid. If the information is too long or complicated, ask a parent or your pharmacist to give you the highlights.

- Don't increase or decrease the dose of your medication without checking with your doctor's office first — no matter how you're feeling.

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