

Prescription drug abuse on the rise across the US

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Prescription medications can save lives and help people more effectively manage severe illnesses or conditions. When used correctly, medications can provide the help needed to alleviate the symptoms of certain conditions. Too often, however, medications -- particularly prescription drugs -- are used improperly. The results can be dangerous and addictive.

Prescription and over-the-counter drugs are safe but only when taken under the supervision of a physician or in adherence with instructions on the bottle. When prescription or OTC medications are not taken according to the instructions provided or used for longer durations than recommended, seemingly safe medications can become problematic. The National Institute on Drug Abuse says approximately 16 million Americans reported using a prescription for nonmedical reasons in 2010.

With predictable highs and easy accessibility, prescription medications are particularly attractive. There is little stigma over having a prescription pill bottle in the medicine cabinet. Oftentimes, those eager to misuse these drugs need only scour their own homes or the cabinets of relatives to find a stash of pills at the ready. Some medications also are sold over the Internet or end up on the street from doctors or pharmacists who realize how lucrative a business selling these pills can be.

The National Institute on Drug Abuse says depressants, opioids and morphine derivatives and stimulants are the most commonly abused drugs. Potential health consequences of many of these drugs can be addiction, increased risk of respiratory distress, slowed breathing, lowered blood pressure, and death. These side effects may increase in severity when medications are taken in concert with alcohol.

It's not just prescription medications that can be abused. OTC drugs, like cough syrup, asthma inhalers, antacids, and sleep aids, also can be dangerous and addictive. While the risks associated with OTC drugs pale in comparison to those associated with prescription drug abuse, OTC medications can affect the liver and kidneys when taken in excess.

To prevent medication abuse, follow these few tips.

» Do not borrow or share medications. A doctor has picked a drug dose and type for the prescribed person's specific needs. Drugs affect everyone differently, so borrowing from another person can produce adverse results.

» Do not mix drugs. Combining stimulants with cold medication, for example, can cause extremely high blood pressure or an irregular heartbeat. Medications should always be used as directed, and a pharmacist or doctor should be consulted if you have a question about using other drugs with the one you are prescribed.

» Alcohol and drugs do not mix. Alcohol, a depressant, can exacerbate the effects of many medications. Alcohol also may compromise decision-making abilities, which could lead to overdose of certain drugs. No matter how safe a drug may seem, it's wise never to take it with alcohol.

» Drugs purchased on the street or from unreliable sources on the Internet may not have the same potency or composition as drugs sold at a legitimate pharmacy. You cannot be assured of the ingredients or how they will perform.

» Children should be warned about misusing drugs, and medications should be kept out of their reach. Drugs should not be characterized as fix-alls and never be compared to candy.

» Dispose of extra pills after you are done using a prescription. There's no need to save some for later if the condition has been effectively treated.

Prescription drugs are now being abused at a higher rate than ever before. Just because they are sold at a pharmacy does not make these medications safe to use in improper ways, and men and women should exercise caution and follow instructions when taking prescription and OTC medications.

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