

## Fact Sheet: Prescription and Over-The-Counter Drugs

**Statistics** - The Center for Disease Control (CDC) has declared that prescription drug abuse in the United States has reached epidemic proportions. Prescription drug overdoses have been established as one of the leading causes of death, killing more Americans than motor vehicle accidents or firearms.

The Foundation for a Drug-Free World reports that more than 15 million people abuse prescription medications – more than heroin, cocaine, hallucinogens and inhalants combined. The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) notes that 52 million people in the United States have used prescription medications non-medically in their lifetime. Although the drugs are frequently used purely for recreational purposes, most people take the drugs for legitimate reasons.

Prescription drugs have claimed the lives of many well-known individuals throughout the years, including Michael Jackson, Heath Ledger, Marilyn Monroe, Judy Garland and Jimi Hendrix.

**Types of Prescription and OTC Drugs** - NIDA divides commonly abused prescription drugs into three primary classes. Over-the-counter (OTC) drugs are also widely abused.

- **Opioid drugs**, prescribed to treat pain
- **Stimulants**, used to treat ADHD and narcolepsy
- **Central nervous system (CNS) depressants**, frequently prescribed to treat sleep disorders and anxiety
- **Over-the-counter (OTC) drugs**, especially cold and cough meds, pain relievers and diet pills

### Opioid Drugs

Opioid drugs cover a wide range of substances, including drugs such as morphine and heroin, which are derived from opium poppies; and synthetic opiate drugs commonly prescribed for treating pain. All opioid drugs are highly addictive.

Examples of legally prescribed opioid drugs and some of their brand names include:

- **Oxycodone** (OxyContin and Roxicodone) **Oxycodone/acetaminophen** (Percodan, Percocet, Roxicet, Endocet)
- **Hydromorphone** (Exalgo, Dilaudid)
- **Hydrocodone** (Zohydro ER)
- **Hydrocodone with acetaminophen** (Vicodin, Norco, Lortab)
- **Meperidine** (Demerol)
- **Fentanyl** (Fentora, Duragesic)
- **Morphine** (Duramorph, Rosanol) also known as white stuff, 'M' or monkey
- **Codeine** (found in many cough, cold and headache medications)

**Effects of prescription opioid drug abuse** - Short term abuse of opioid drugs may include severe constipation, nausea, confusion, drowsiness, lack of coordination and poor decision making. Heavy or long-term use of the drug may induce dangerous slowing of breathing and heartbeat, sometimes resulting in accidental overdose.

### Sedative Drugs

Sedatives include prescription drugs that act as central nervous depressants. The three most commonly prescribed sedatives are **barbiturates, benzodiazepines and sleep medicines**. Examples of sedative drugs and some of their brand names include:

- **Barbiturates**, largely replaced by newer drugs known as benzodiazepines, are no longer frequently prescribed. However, they continue to be used for general anesthesia and are sometimes prescribed for certain conditions, including acute migraine headaches and epilepsy. Common barbiturates include secobarbital (Seconal), pentobarbital (Nembutol) and penobarbital (Luminal).
- **Benzodiazepines** are used to treat anxiety, panic attacks, acute stress and chronic insomnia. The drugs are highly addictive and not intended for long-term use. Commonly prescribed benzodiazepines, also known as "benzos," include alprazolam (Xanax); diazepam (Valium); and lorazepam (Ativan).
- **Sleep medications** are comprised of drugs such as eszopiclone (Lunesta); zaleplon (Sontata); and zolpidem (Ambien).

**Effects of sedative drug abuse** - Short term use of sedative drugs may include slurred speech, slowed breathing, drowsiness, dizziness, confusion, poor concentration, memory problems, decreased motivation, increased appetite or loss of appetite, menstrual irregularities, disturbing dreams and decreased libido. Long term use may result in stupor, respiratory difficulties, coma and possible death.

### **Stimulant Drugs**

Stimulants are a type of drug used to enhance brain activity. The drugs have historically been used to treat asthma, obesity, and certain neurological disorders. Prescription of stimulant medications has decreased in recent years as the potential for abuse and addiction have become increasingly apparent. Today, stimulant drugs are prescribed primarily for ADD/ADHD, narcolepsy, and sometimes for depression that fails to respond to other treatments. Commonly prescribed stimulants include:

- **Amphetamine** - (Adderall XR, Benzedrine)
- **Methylphenidate** - (Concerta, Ritalin)
- **Dextroamphetamine** - (Dexedrine)

**Effects of stimulant drug abuse** - Short term effects of stimulant use include increased energy and alertness, agitation, insomnia, reduced appetite, high blood pressure and increases in heart rate and respiration. High doses can bring about abnormally high body temperature, irregular heart rate, mood swings, anger, paranoia, seizures and heart failure.

### **Over-the-counter (OTC) drugs**

OTC drugs may be legal and easy to attain, but that doesn't mean the substances aren't dangerous. Commonly misused OTC drugs include the following:

**Cold and cough medicines** – Many OTC meds used to relieve cold symptoms are dangerous when misused. Symptoms may include distorted perceptions, loss of coordination, nausea, dizziness, hallucinations and depression. Medicines containing dextromethorphan (DSM, or DXM) are especially risky. It's also important to note that some cough syrups contain up to 10 percent alcohol.

**Pain Relievers** – OTC meds containing ibuprofen and acetaminophen are found in nearly every medicine cabinet. However, the medications can be highly toxic when taken in high doses or used too frequently.

**Diet pills** – Diet aids, including diuretics and laxatives are available in pharmacies, but the drugs are often taken solely for their stimulant effects. For example, products containing ephedrine, which is often tagged as a natural substance, is a dangerous stimulant when taken in large quantities.

OTC drugs are intended to be used in moderation. However, the drugs can be dangerous, and even deadly when combined with alcohol or other drugs. Depending on the substance, effects may include insomnia, diarrhea, vomiting, blurred vision, anxiety, breathing problems, dizziness, paranoia, numbness, lethargy, and altered heart rate.

Long term use of OTC drugs may lead to liver and brain damage, heart problems, and damage to the central nervous system.

**Signs of prescription drug abuse** – People who abuse prescription drugs may display mood swings, sleep disturbances, anger, and irritability. They may engage in theft, doctor shopping, forging prescriptions or other illegal activities in an attempt to attain more medications.

**Tolerance** – People who use prescription medications for months or years can develop a tolerance to the substances, which means higher and higher doses of the drug are needed to attain the same results. However, it's important to realize that tolerance and addiction aren't the same thing.

Tolerance can be a normal reaction as the body adjusts to the drug and the liver is able to process the substances more effectively, but tolerance can also lead to physical dependence and addiction. It's critical for prescription drug users to discuss symptoms of tolerance with their physician, as tolerance continues to build as long as the drug is used. It's never wise to stop using prescription medications without medical guidance.

**Withdrawal** – Symptoms depend on a number of factors, including type of drug, duration of use and amount used. However, withdrawal may involve shakes and tremors, chills and goose bumps, bone and muscle pain, insomnia, abdominal cramps, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, sweating, racing thoughts, depression and seizures.

Fear of difficult symptoms often prevent people from seeking treatment, but a skilled treatment center can provide medically-supervised detox that can minimize cravings and make the withdrawal period more comfortable. Some prescription drugs can be tapered off gradually to prevent dangerous withdrawal symptoms. Most importantly, detox should never be attempted without medical assistance.

**Treatment and recovery** – It's very possible to learn how to manage life without addictive substances, and the road to recovery begins with detox. Once the substance has safely left the body, the next step is to begin treatment, which may include individual and/or group therapy, family therapy, and a detailed aftercare and relapse prevention plan.

**Preventing addiction to prescription drugs** – Most people who take prescription medications as recommended don't become addicted, even after taking the drug for a long period of time. However, some people are at higher risk of addiction due to factors such as environment, family history, prior addiction and co-occurring disorders such as depression or anxiety.

To minimize the risk of addiction to prescription drugs, always follow directions strictly and never change the dosage without seeking your doctor's advice. Keep in touch and make sure your medical provider understands your symptoms and your level of discomfort. Let your doctor know about all the medicines you take, including vitamins, herbal supplements or over-the-counter medications.

Never order medicine on the Internet, as many online pharmacies sell dangerous or counterfeit drugs.

Never borrow another person's prescription. Similarly, never give medications to another person.

**Preventing misuse of prescription drugs** – At least 60 percent of prescription drug abusers, including teens, get the drugs from friends and family, usually without their knowledge. To prevent misuse of prescription medications, always:

- Discard unused medications properly. If you don't have a prescription drug disposal facility in your area, ask your pharmacist how you should safely dispose of the drugs. The patient information included with the medication should also have disposal information.
- Monitor your medications closely. Keep them in a locked cabinet – not a medicine cabinet.

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