



**The Partnership**  
for a Drug-Free  
America®



# **Getting High on Prescription and Over-the-Counter Drugs Is Dangerous**

A guide to keeping your teenager  
safe in a changing world

[www.drugfree.org](http://www.drugfree.org)



❏ Prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) medications are fast becoming the new “party” drugs for many teenagers.

But many parents, who may be aware of their children’s familiarity with illegal street drugs, do not have “pharming”—that is, their kids’ using prescription and OTC drugs for recreational use—on their radar screens, even though nearly one in five teens has used powerful narcotic pain relievers for nonmedical reasons.

#### FRIGHTENING STATS

A survey of teenagers by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America found that:

- 1 in 5 teens has tried Vicodin, a powerful and addictive narcotic pain reliever
- 1 in 10 has tried OxyContin, another prescription narcotic
- 1 in 10 has used the stimulants Ritalin or Adderall for nonmedical purposes
- 1 in 11 teens has admitted to getting high on cough medicine



## THE NEW PARTY DRUGS

Nor are parents aware that their own medicine cabinets and home computers are potential sources of these drugs for teenage abuse.

Prescription and OTC drugs are important and beneficial products that every year improve and save countless lives. They are effective, and they are also safe—but only if used as medically intended.

We're NOT talking about kids mistakenly taking the wrong dose of legal medicines or taking a stronger than-necessary medicine for an ailment. We're talking about drug abuse—kids using prescription and OTC drugs on purpose in order to get high.

If your teen gets in the habit of using medicines that are not medically intended for him or her, or of taking higher-than-recommended doses just for fun, bad things can happen: Dramatic increases in blood pressure and heart rate, organ damage, addiction, difficulty breathing, seizures, and possibly death.

➔ For more information, visit [www.drugfree.org](http://www.drugfree.org)

### **Why is this increase in teenage prescription and OTC drug abuse happening now?**

Awareness and access. Mainly for good reasons, our society is very familiar—and more and more comfortable—with prescription pharmaceuticals and OTC medicines. Products come to market, their images advertised in newspapers, magazines, and on television and the Internet, with educational programs to raise our understanding of the conditions they treat. Many new drugs replace older ones with safer and more effective formulations.

### **Caught in the Web**

Then there's the Internet, which has been at the center of an explosion of information of all kinds, good and bad. You can find useful information on the Web about the risks from the nonmedical, recreational use of prescription and OTC drugs. But you can also learn how to abuse them. Many websites describe for would-be abusers what kinds of cough medicine they should buy, how much to take, and even how much to take to get high.

Most disturbingly, it is as easy for a teenager to buy narcotic pain relievers like Vicodin or stimulants like Adderall or sedatives like Xanax over the Internet as it is to buy a book or CD. Enter "no prescription Vicodin" in your Web browser's search bar, and you'll find numerous websites ready to sell your son or daughter various prescription drugs—without the nuisance of an actual prescription or even asking your child's age—delivered to your home in an unmarked package.

But the most immediate source of prescription and OTC drugs is your own medicine cabinet or the medicine cabinets in the homes of your child's friends. New and expired or forgotten prescriptions or last winter's OTC cough medicines could be inviting targets for the teenager looking to get high.

## What to Do?

Some parents need to consider their own drug behavior. If you're casual about using prescription or OTC drugs, even if you're not looking to get high, you can set a bad example. Medications should be used by the person for whom they're intended, to treat the conditions for which they're intended. Don't use your kid's Ritalin to give you the energy and focus to complete a difficult work assignment. Regard these drugs seriously, and it's a good bet your child will, too. Start by taking an inventory of the drugs in your medicine cabinet.

It's up to you to educate yourself about the real dangers of prescription and OTC drug abuse and to discuss these risks with your teen. Kids need to hear from parents that **getting high on legal prescription and OTC drugs is not safer than getting high on illegal street drugs.**

And reaching out to have that discussion is not just an idle suggestion. It works. Research shows that kids who learn a lot about drug risks from their parents are up to half as likely to use drugs as kids who haven't had that conversation with Mom and Dad.

Unfortunately, research also shows that fewer parents today are talking to their teenagers about drugs than they were only a few years ago.

It's time to turn that stat around. This brochure can help. So can the information found on the website of the Partnership for a Drug-Free America—[www.drugfree.org](http://www.drugfree.org)—or at the other resources listed at the end of this booklet.

Quite simply, if you're not educating your children about health risks they may encounter, you are not providing the protection they need in today's changing world.

What could be more basic to being a parent than protecting your child from harm?

## Educate Yourself

If you're going to discuss prescription and OTC drug abuse with your kids, you need to know what you're talking about. You should be able to distinguish among the types and effects of drugs some teens use to get high. Some of these drugs are described below.

## PRESCRIPTION (RX) DRUGS

Safe when used according to a doctor's instructions, **these medications should be taken only by the person for whom a doctor has prescribed them.** Using prescription drugs prescribed for others or without doctor's orders is unsafe and illegal.



Codeine

### Pain Medications

Teenagers abuse narcotic pain relievers more than any other prescription medicine. Mentions of these very powerful drugs as reasons for emergency room visits have nearly tripled over the recent decade.

**Vicodin** (hydrocodone) ■ **OxyContin** (oxycodone) ■ **Percocet** (oxycodone and acetaminophen) ■ **Darvon** (propoxyphene) ■ **Codeine**

#### May be medically useful for:

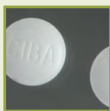
- Treating moderate-to-severe pain, such as after surgery or dental procedures.

#### Abused by teens to:

- Feel pleasure or sensations of well-being.

#### Dangerous because:

- Highly addictive. Over time, tolerance develops to certain effects of these drugs, resulting in the need to take more and more to get the same pleasant feelings. Addicted teens who suddenly stop using may go through withdrawal, a horrible physical experience of intense restlessness, muscle and bone pain, insomnia, diarrhea, vomiting, and cold flashes.
- Taken in overdose, breathing slows down and eventually stops, and death may occur. Time-released products like OxyContin, designed to deliver pain-relieving medication into the system slowly over hours, may be crushed and snorted, causing the drug to enter the system all at once, sometimes resulting in death.
- Taken in combination with other prescription or OTC drugs or alcohol, the risk of life-threatening respiratory depression is increased.



## Stimulants

Stimulants increase the amounts of circulating brain chemicals that raise blood pressure and heart rate, speed up breathing, decrease appetite, and deprive the user of sleep.

**Ritalin, Concerta** (methylphenidate) ■ **Adderall** (mixed amphetamine salts) ■ **Focalin** (dexmethylphenidate) ■ **Dexedrine** (dextroamphetamine)

### May be medically useful for:

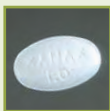
- Treating attention deficit/ hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), narcolepsy; short-term treatment of obesity.

### Abused by teens to:

- Feel especially alert, focused, and full of energy. May help them to manage stressful schoolwork or "pull an all-nighter."
- Suppress appetite in order to lose weight.

### Dangerous because:

- Can be addictive.
- High doses taken over a short time can lead to feelings of hostility, intense fear, and paranoia.
- High doses may result in dangerously high body temperature and irregular heartbeat, with possible cardiovascular failure or seizures.
- Use in combination with OTC decongestants can result in dangerously high blood pressure or irregular heart rhythms.
- Can cause insomnia, digestive problems, and erratic weight change.



## Sedatives, Sedative-Hypnotics, and Tranquilizers

Sedatives, sedative-hypnotics, and tranquilizers affect brain systems to produce a drowsy or calming effect, sometimes to the point of inducing sleep.

**Benzodiazepines:** **Valium** (diazepam) ■ **Xanax** (alprazolam) ■ **Ativan** (lorazepam) ■ **Klonopin** (clonazepam) ■ **Restoril** (temazepam)

**Non-Benzodiazepine Sedatives:** **Ambien** (zolpidem) ■ **Lunesta** (eszopiclone)

**Barbiturates:** **Mebaral** (mephobarbital) ■ **Nembutal** (pentobarbital)

### May be medically useful for:

- Treating anxiety, severe stress, panic attacks, and insomnia in the short-term, as well as some types of seizure disorders and muscle spasms.

### Abused by teens to:

- Feel calm and sleepy with less tension, anxiety, or panic, feelings that go away as the body becomes drug-tolerant.

### Dangerous because:

- Can be addictive; when use is reduced or stopped, seizures and other withdrawal symptoms may follow.
- Can be deadly in combination with prescription pain medications, some OTC cold and allergy drugs, or alcohol.

## OVER-THE-COUNTER (OTC) DRUGS

OTC drugs are available at any pharmacy without a prescription. Like prescription drugs, they're safe when used according to packaged instructions or when recommended by a doctor familiar with your medical history and other medications you may be taking.

Cough Medicine



### Cough Medicines

Teens can get high by taking cough medicine in excessive amounts. What makes them high is the cough suppressant ingredient called dextromethorphan, or DXM for short, found in more than 100 OTC products. In syrups, tablets, capsules, lozenges, and gelatin capsules, DXM can be found combined with other substances, such as antihistamines, expectorants, decongestants, and/or simple pain relievers.

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*Coricidin cough and cold tablets ■ Alka-Seltzer Plus cold and cough medicine ■ TheraFlu cough products ■ select Robitussin cough products ■ Tylenol cold and cough products ... and many others, including store brands. To know if a product contains DXM, look on the label for "dextromethorphan" in the list of active ingredients.*

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#### **May be medically useful for:**

- Treating coughs and colds safely and effectively, when used according to directions.

#### **Abused by teens to:**

- Experience DXM's effects, which range from euphoria to feelings of enhanced awareness to distortions of color and sound to visual hallucinations to "out-of-body" sensations, when users lose contact with their senses.

#### **Dangerous because:**

- DXM's negative physical effects from overdose include rapid heartbeat, high blood pressure, diarrhea, seizures, panic, drowsiness, confusion, dizziness, blurred vision, impaired physical coordination, and coma.
- Side effects may be worse when DXM is used with other medications or with alcohol or illegal drugs.
- Overdoses of other ingredients found in DXM-containing medicines have their own serious side effects, including:
  - **Acetaminophen** (pain reliever) = liver damage.
  - **Chlorpheniramine** (antihistamine) = increased heart rate, lack of coordination, seizures, and coma.
  - **Guaifenesin** (expectorant) = vomiting.
  - **Pseudoephedrine** (decongestant) = irregular heartbeat, headaches, difficulty breathing, anxiety, and seizures.



## More Drugs, More Danger

Prescription and OTC drugs have side effects that range from the unpleasant to the dangerous for the teen using them recreationally. But the effects—and the dangers—are intensified when these drugs are combined with each other, with alcohol, or with illegal street drugs. Even when used at the recommended doses to treat medical conditions, combining multiple medications can be dangerous.

## Use an Expert

Further educate yourself about teenage recreational use of prescription and OTC drugs by talking directly to an expert about your concerns. If you find drugs or drug paraphernalia in your child's room, but you're not certain what they are, show them to your child's physician or pharmacist, who are best able to identify suspect substances for you.

And if you need information quickly about the kinds of drugs teens may be abusing, how to talk to your child whom you suspect may be abusing drugs, or what to do if you know your child is definitely using drugs, visit [www.drugfree.org](http://www.drugfree.org).

### WARNING SIGNS

Clues that your child may be abusing prescription or OTC drugs to get high:

- Visits to pro-drug Internet sites devoted to “how to” get and abuse prescription and OTC drugs.
- Cough or cold, prescription, or unidentifiable medications among personal effects with no evidence of illness.
- Unexplained disappearance of medicines from medicine cabinet.
- Declining grades, loss of interest in hobbies and usual activities.
- Changes in friends, physical appearance, hygiene, and general behavior.
- Disrupted eating or sleeping patterns.



As a parent, you are in the best position possible to help steer your child away from intentionally abusing prescription and OTC drugs. Some tips:

### **Set an Example**

Don't abuse prescription and OTC drugs yourself. Use drugs as the doctor or label intends. Don't medicate today's headache or the sore muscles from yesterday's golf game with the prescription pain medication your doctor gave you after last year's surgery. Such a casual attitude may reinforce the false assumption that, because they were made by a pharmaceutical company, these drugs automatically must be safe to treat any condition or problem. If you have a physical complaint, see a doctor. But don't use another person's prescription drugs. Ever.

Use OTC medicines according to packaged instructions or your doctor's recommendations. Taking far more cough medicine than the label instructs will not make your cough go away any faster. It can, however, indicate to your teenager that it is alright to take more medicine than necessary. That's dangerous.

### **Connect with Your Kids**

Get and stay closely involved with your kids' lives as they go through middle school and into high school. You won't connect well with your kids about serious health issues if you haven't been interested in the



day-to-day events of interest to them. Use part of your daily conversations to talk honestly about prescription and OTC drug abuse. Know the facts, clear up wrong information, but don't make it all a lecture: Listen to your children's questions and comments about their drug topics of concern.

### **Stop the Myth**

**Getting high with prescription and OTC medications is NOT safer than getting high with illicit street drugs.** Prescription painkillers, stimulants, sedatives, tranquilizers, and OTC cough medicines are dangerous when used in excess and repeatedly to get high.

### **Help Your Child Make Good Decisions**

Your child is more likely to be offered drugs by a friend than a stranger, and exposure to drugs can begin as early as age 12. He or she may be better equipped to avoid peer pressure to get high if there is a solid, explicit family policy against drug abuse to fall back on. Give your child the ammunition to make clear to his or her acquaintances that the consequences of abusing these drugs are too severe to risk. Set clear and consistent rules for behavior, and help your child come up with firm but friendly responses to use with friends who might urge drug abuse. Remind your child that a real friend won't care if he or she does not abuse these medications.

## SAFEGUARD YOUR MEDICATIONS



■ A main source for teenagers of prescription and OTC drugs is the family medicine cabinet. Think about it: Pharmaceuticals are much easier to get—just a walk down the hall or a peek into a friend’s medicine cabinet—than illegal street drugs. Prescription and OTC drugs are beneficial and necessary, but if you are not in need of them right now, put them out of reach of younger children and teens to avoid accidental use or intentional abuse.

### MEDICINE INVENTORY

- Do an inventory of the contents of your medicine cabinets, kitchen cabinets, bureau tops, or anywhere in the house where you may store medicines.
- If necessary, monitor the pill quantities and medicine levels in your prescription and OTC drug containers.
- Put drugs away. If you currently need these drugs, put them in a place where you can get to them easily but where your child is unlikely to look.
- If drugs in your house are left over from a previous condition or ailment, get rid of them.
- Urge your friends—especially the parents of your children’s friends—to perform medicine inventories of their own.



### **If you suspect you have a kid in trouble, act now!**

Teenage drug abuse is tied to two basic urges:

1. The desire to experiment in order to feel good while wanting to follow the crowd to fit in.
2. The intention to self-medicate to help deal with the various sources of stress—schoolwork, relationships, or conflicts with friends or family members. Recent research estimates that as many as half of teens who abuse drugs also have mental health issues that need treating.

**You DO have the power to influence your child's decision about whether or not to use prescription and OTC drugs for recreation.** Research says that fear of upsetting parents is the number one reason why kids do not use drugs.

### **Intervention**

If you're convinced your child has a drug abuse problem, consider an intervention. It doesn't have to be a formal confrontation; a simple but directed discussion will do. Here are some tips to keep the conversation going:

- Have your discussion when your child is not high and when you are calm and rational.
- Express your love and desire for your child's safety and well-being as the basis for your concern.
- Be as neutral and nonjudgmental as you can.
- Tell your child of the behavioral signs you've observed that made you concerned. Avoid direct accusations, but be open about your suspicions.
- Listen, listen, listen! Consider everything your child has to say. If he or she brings up a related problem, explain that you will address that issue next, but that what you need to talk about right now is prescription or OTC drug abuse.
- If you need help getting this conversation started, involve another family member, your child's guidance counselor, or a physician. Or check out the website of the Partnership for a Drug-Free America—[www.drugfree.org](http://www.drugfree.org)—for more suggestions on raising the topic of drug abuse with your teen.



**The Partnership for a Drug-Free America**

[www.drugfree.org](http://www.drugfree.org) • Comprehensive information, resources and tips from experts and other parents; opportunities to connect and share experiences with other families.

**Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)**

[www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov) • Part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Provides information, statistics and articles on improving the quality and availability of drug and alcohol addiction treatment.

**SAMHSA's National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI)**

<http://ncadi.samhsa.gov> or **1-877-SAMHSA7** • Part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: A resource for federal government agency publications dealing with alcohol and drug use prevention and addiction treatment.

**SAMHSA's Center on Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT)**

[www.csat.samhsa.gov](http://www.csat.samhsa.gov) or **1-800-662-HELP** • Part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Toll-free treatment referral hotline provides callers with information and listings of treatment and recovery services for alcohol and drug problems.



### **National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA)**

[www.drugabuse.gov](http://www.drugabuse.gov) • Part of the U.S.

Department of Health and Human Services and one of the National Institutes of Health: Primary source of scientific studies and new discoveries on the effects of drugs of abuse and how best to prevent drug abuse and treat drug addiction.

### **National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)**

[www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov) • Part of the U.S.

Department of Health and Human Services and one of the National Institutes of Health: Primary source of scientific research on mental and behavioral disorders.

#### **GET HELP**

The important first step with any health issue is to get a professional evaluation of your child's condition. If you think your child needs professional help, your doctor, hospital, or school nurse may be able to help. Or you can call **1.800.662.HELP** or visit **[www.drugfree.org/intervention](http://www.drugfree.org/intervention)** and click on "Find Treatment."



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