Prescription Drugs

Abuse of *prescription drugs* is defined as the use of prescription medications by a person who does not have a prescription for the medication, or the taking of a prescription drug for the feelings it causes rather than for its intended use.

According to a recent survey, prescription drug abuse among K-State students has increased from approximately 1% in 2006 to 12% in 2012.

Prescription drug use in the United States has quickly and dramatically increased since the early 1990s. Unlike most illegal drugs, prescription drugs can be acquired through several venues and seem to be fairly simple to obtain. The Internet is one of the primary sources for people to find easy access to prescription drugs. Nearly 90% of Internet sites selling prescription drugs do not require a prescription. According to one recent report, there were 157 websites selling controlled substances, and none of them had any mechanism in place for blocking minors from purchasing their medications.

Another way of obtaining prescription drugs is through “doctor shopping.” Doctor shopping is the process of going from doctor to doctor in order to be given multiple prescriptions for the same drug of choice. Another popular method, especially among younger adults, is buying medications from friends or individuals who are selling their own prescription medications for illegal profits. Individuals may also simply steal medications from people they know, such as parents, siblings or roommates for personal use or to sell to others wanting to use the medication recreationally.

Many people hold the false assumption that prescription drugs are not as dangerous as illegal drugs. This misperception is related to the fact that most prescription drugs are helpful when used as directed. Other reasons for the false assumptions about prescription drugs are that they are produced under clean and consistent conditions, and the belief there is less legal risk involved in possessing prescription drugs compared to illegal drugs.

Some experts attribute the rise in prescription drug abuse to the fact that since there are more prescription drugs available to more people, the opportunity for abuse is greatly increased. The percentage of people taking at least one prescription medication in the age range of 18 to 44 is nearly 35%.

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Commonly Abused Prescription Drugs

**Opioids/Narcotics.** A class of medications typically prescribed to treat pain (ex. Morphine, Codeine, Dilaudid, Percocet, OxyContin, Methadone and Vicodin).

**Depressants.** These are typically used to treat anxiety and sleep disorders (ex. Nembutal, Klonopin, Valium, Halcion and Xanax).

**Stimulants.** Commonly prescribed to treat Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), narcolepsy, and occasionally depression and obesity (ex. Ritalin, Adderall and Concerta).

In the News

- **College students more likely to misuse Adderall.** College students between the ages of 18 and 22 were twice as likely to use Adderall nonmedically as those who had not been in college at all or were only part-time students. Approximately 90 percent of the full-time college students who had used Adderall nonmedically in the past year also engaged in binge drinking in the past month, and more than 50 percent were heavy alcohol users; they were also three times more likely to use marijuana and eight times more likely to use cocaine. Adderall is classified as a Schedule II drug because of its high potential for abuse and dependence.

- **Adderall preferred by college students who misuse prescription medications for ADD.** College students who use prescription stimulants as study aids prefer the slow-release drug Adderall to Ritalin, researchers from Northwestern University report. Students are three times more likely to take Adderall than Ritalin. Adderall is an amphetamine-dextroamphetamine product, while Ritalin's active ingredient is methylphenidate. Researchers also found that far more college students took the drugs to improve their schoolwork than to get high. Most students only began using the drugs in college. Researchers speculated that Adderall is more popular than Ritalin because it produces a steadier, longer-lasting effect and also is more commonly prescribed, and thus more available.

- **Abuse of ADHD drugs found rampant.** A study from the National Institute on Drug Abuse estimated that more than 1.6 million American teens and young adults misused ADHD drugs during a 12-month period, and 75,000 became addicted.

- **One baby is born every hour in the U.S. with symptoms of opioid withdrawal.** Every hour, a baby is born in the U.S. with symptoms of opioid withdrawal, according to a recent study in the Journal of the American Medical Association. “The incidence has gone crazy and I think it has the potential to become a national or international issue,” said Marie J. Hayes of the University of Maine, who co-authored an editorial accompanying the study. “People who previously might not have used heroin or the needle are more likely to use prescription opiates.”
• **Other drug problems associated with prescription drug abuse.** Research conducted in 2008 showed that students who took prescription drugs for non-medical reasons were at least five times more likely to develop a drug abuse problem than those who did not.

• **Painkiller overdoses.** In 2008, prescription painkiller overdoses killed approximately 14,800 Americans. In 2009, when opioid abuse propelled a ghastly rise in the number of drug-related deaths nationwide, 37,485 Americans died from narcotics overdoses—a figure that for the first time surpassed the number of deaths from car accidents!

• **Prescription drug abuse remains a significant problem.** In a 2010 survey conducted by the University of Michigan, approximately 7 million persons were current users of prescription drugs taken nonmedically. Nearly 1 in 12 high school seniors reported nonmedical use of Vicodin, and 1 in 20 reported abuse of OxyContin. When asked how prescription narcotics were obtained for nonmedical use, 70% of 12th graders said they were given them by a friend or relative.

• **New laws decrease painkiller sales.** Thanks to new laws in Florida regulating the amount of Oxycodone a single doctor can purchase, sales of the drug have declined 97% from 2010 to 2011, according to figures cited by Obama drug czar Kerlikowske on March 1, 2012.

• **Fake Adderall.** Last month the Food and Drug Administration warned that a counterfeit form of the drug Adderall is being sold online. The phony pills analyzed by the FDA contained the painkillers tramadol and acetaminophen. Several spelling mistakes on the labels of fake medications make them easier to detect. The fake Adderall tablets are round and white, while genuine Adderall tablets are round and orange/peach colored.

**Signs of Prescription Drug Abuse**

• Taking higher doses than the amount prescribed
• Change in personality and mood
• Social withdrawal
• Continued use despite the medical condition improving
• Time spent on obtaining the prescription drug
• Changes in daily habits and appearance
• Neglects responsibilities
• Increased sensitivity to sights, sounds and emotions
• Blackouts and forgetfulness
• Defensiveness
• Stealing, forging or selling prescriptions
• Poor decision-making
• Appearing to be intoxicated, unusually energetic, revved up or sedated
• Continually loses prescriptions, so more prescriptions must be written
• Seeking prescriptions from more than one doctor
Treatment for Prescription Drug Abuse

Available options for effectively treating addiction to prescription drugs depend on the medication being abused. Approaches to treating pain reliever addiction are drawn from research on treating heroin addiction, and include medications combined with behavioral counseling. Recent research supported by NIDA showed that Suboxone, prescribed in primary care settings, helped about half of all participants reduce their pain reliever abuse during extended Suboxone treatment.

Although no medications exist to treat addiction to Central Nervous System (CNS) depressants or to prescription stimulants, behavioral therapies proven effective in treating other drug addictions may be used. NIDA is currently supporting multiple studies to identify promising medications for stimulant addiction.

Guidelines for Using Prescription Drugs Safer

According to the FDA, guidelines for using prescription medications safely include:
- Always follow the prescription medication directions carefully
- Don’t increase or decrease medication doses without talking with your doctor
- Never stop taking medication on your own
- Don’t crush or break pills (especially important if the pills are time-released).
- Be clear about the drug’s effects on driving and other daily tasks
- Talk honestly with your doctor about any history of substance abuse
- Learn about possible interactions of the prescription medication with alcohol, other prescription drugs and over-the-counter drugs
- Never allow other people to use your prescription medications and don’t take theirs

RESOURCES

KSU Counseling Services
English/Counseling Services Bldg.
Phone: 532-6927

KSU Alcohol & Other Drug Education Service
Director: Bill Arck
214 English/Counseling Services Bldg.
Phone: 532-6927

Alcoholics Anonymous
Noon Meeting (Mon.-Sat.)
Blue Valley United Methodist Church
835 Church Ave.
Phone: 537-9260

The intent of Higher Education is to provide accurate, timely information representing the current state of alcohol/drug knowledge. Keep in mind that research on these matters continues daily and is subject to change. It is our intention to keep you informed, not to diagnose or treat illness. For personal alcohol and other drug problems, please consult your physician or counselor.

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