

Volunteer Leader Training Guide

Prescription Drug Abuse: When Families Become Drug Dealers

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Introduction

We are a pill taking society. Prescription drugs are found in homes in every county. They are quickly becoming the drug of choice among teens and are increasingly a problem among elderly adults. You will be surprised to learn that Arkansas has the highest rates of teenage prescription drug abuse in the nation. The reason this lesson is important for you is that if you have medicines in your home, you can be a target for medication theft. In addition, if you interact with teenagers, or people ages 12-25, you can become a “teen influencer” and help prevent this growing serious problem. Studies show that just talking with teens about the risks of prescription drug abuse can lower their chances of becoming addicted to prescription drugs by 50 percent.

Prescription drug abuse is not just a teenager’s problem. Many seniors can get addicted to prescription drugs, especially as getting older gets harder. In addition, after having surgeries, oftentimes pain pills are needed for recovery. These medicines are highly addictive! There is a growing problem of adults, especially people over 60, abusing prescription drugs, sometimes even unknowingly. This lesson will help you understand the risks of prescription drug abuse at any age. It will also help you understand the importance of being vigilant in how you use and store your medicines.

Target Audiences

- EHC leaders
- Retired and senior citizen groups

Objectives

- Participants will learn about the prescription drug abuse problem.
- Participants will learn the signs and symptoms of prescription drug abuse.
- Participants will learn the types of drugs and how they can cause an addiction.
- Participants will learn empowering tips to protect themselves and others from prescription drug abuse.

Main Teaching Points

- Define the problem of prescription drug abuse.
- Identify at least one risk associated with prescription drug abuse.
- Identify at least two signs or symptoms that someone is having a prescription drug abuse problem.
- Identify three types of drugs that have potential of being abused.
- Identify at least one thing a person can do to prevent the rising rates of prescription drug abuse.

Suggestions for Teaching

- Review the teaching guide.
- Obtain copies of:
 - Handout 1: **Guide to Prescription Drug Abuse**
 - Pre-survey and post-survey (one page, front and back, or stapled together)
- **Give each participant a survey and ask them to complete the pre-survey section. PLEASE copy the evaluation front and back. In order to keep good quality data, the answers of the persons who respond to the pre-survey must be matched with the post-survey.**

The Problem of Prescription Drug Abuse

Consider these facts:

- Twenty-two percent of Arkansas high school students say they've abused prescription drugs by the time they're seniors (Arkansas Present Needs Assessment, 2008). This number is higher once you factor in over-the-counter medicine abuse.
- Arkansas sixth graders abuse more prescription drugs than any other substance except alcohol and cigarettes (Arkansas Present Needs Assessment, 2008).
- Sixty-two percent of teens believe most teens get drugs from their parents'/family's medicine cabinets, and 63 percent of teens believe drugs are easy to get from their parents'/family's medicine cabinets, up from 56 percent last year (2009 Partnership Attitude Tracking Study).
- A majority of teens (8 out of 10) get prescription drugs from friends and relatives by stealing, buying or simply asking for them.
- The Saline County Sheriff's Operation Medicine Cabinet, a program to take back unwanted or unused prescription drugs, gathered nearly 52,000 pills in eight hours back in February 2010.
- Arkansas is among states with the highest rates of non-medical use of pain relievers among 12 to 25 year olds (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services).
- One in three teens knows someone who abuses prescription drugs.
- One in three teens thinks there is nothing wrong with using prescription drugs every once in a while.
- Prescription drugs are abused more than cocaine, heroin, ecstasy and methamphetamine combined.
- A part of teen culture involves "pharming parties." It is a party where teens bring various medicines, combine them in a bowl and then each teen takes a handful to get high.
- According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, about 18 percent of adults over the age of 60 have problems with prescription drug abuse.

Why Do Teenagers and Elderly Abuse Drugs?

The reasons for prescription drug abuse vary with age. Let's review why different age groups get hooked on prescription drugs.

Teenagers

Being a teenager is no picnic, especially today when there is increasing pressure for teens to perform better and faster. This is also a time when teens are on a road of self-discovery and compare themselves to others while pushing the limits of new-found freedom. It is important to fit in, to be well-liked while balancing personal goals and pressures. Due to the fact that the teenage brain is not yet fully developed and teens lack life experience, their judgment and ability to make sound decisions is not as good. The brain fully matures at age 25.

Many teenagers also incorrectly believe that prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) drugs are a safer way to get high or cope with the stress of performing better at schools or in sports. Many teens have grown up seeing their parents, grandparents and family members take medicines to treat illnesses. So what's the harm? Medicines are legal in their eyes, so they must be safe.

What teens do not understand is that taking medicines without a doctor's prescription is ***just as harmful and illegal as street drugs.***

Why do teens abuse drugs? Let's review some reasons:

- They're easy to get, especially in family medicine cabinets or from other friends.
- It's easy not to get caught. Many adults, including parents, are not aware of this problem.
- Thrill seeking/feelings of invincibility.
- Friends are doing it.
- Easy to share drugs.
- They feel prescription drugs are safer, even if not prescribed by a doctor.
- We are a pill-taking society and teens notice it!
 - Lots of ads about drugs.
 - Seven out of ten patients leave a doctor's office with a prescription.
 - Many people don't use their medicines properly.
- Escape problems/self-medicate.
- Lack of self esteem.
- Seen as safer alternative with fewer side effects.
- Less stigma associated with Rx drugs.
- Parents less likely to disapprove.
- They're looking for help.
- Unlike with other forms of adolescent drug use, the desire to feel good or get high ranks much lower as a motivator for prescription drug misuse. More often, teens turn to prescription drugs to help manage their daily lives – for example, to lower stress and anxiety, stay up all night to study, boost their mood or increase performance in school or sports.

Many parents don't know how to talk to their teens about prescription drug abuse. Many adults don't know they can become a "teen influencer" and reach teens to prevent this growing problem.

Older Adults

Older persons:

- consume over one-third of all prescription drugs in the United States,
- are less compliant with their medication schedules.
- mix medicines, and
- are more isolated than younger age groups.

All of these factors place seniors at greater risk of developing substance abuse problems. In addition, as elderly patients get older, they develop dependencies that encourage addictive behaviors. For example, sometimes getting older means not being able to do social things like before or not being able to function in daily life by getting around as easily as before. In these instances, it is easier to pop a pill as long as it helps to continue living independently. Frequently, abuse of medicines by older adults goes unrecognized by physicians and family members.

Physicians often fail to recognize medicine abuse because:

- Lack of awareness. They simply don't think to look for it.
- Embarrassment at the thought of suggesting their elderly patient might be accused of drug abuse.
- Failure to perceive the importance of addressing the problem.
- The idea that "they're old, let them have a little pleasure."
- Patients often do not communicate with their doctors about all of the medicines they are taking.
- Sometimes patients seek out numerous physicians to get various prescriptions of certain medicines, such as valium.

What Are the Most Abused Drugs?

There are several types of drugs that are "hot" for both teens and seniors alike. For senior adults, the fact of taking medicines to control chronic diseases makes it easier to take other medicines, which most often include pain killers, other narcotics and sleeping aids. All are highly addictive.

Strong pain relievers are prescribed to treat moderate to severe pain. Teens often go in search of these to get high or feel pleasure. Elderly often use them for chronic diseases or recovery after surgery. Technical names for some of these drugs include Vicodin, OxyContin, Percocet, Lorcet, Lortab, Actiq, Darvon, codeine, morphine and methadone.

Stimulants speed up brain activity, resulting in greater alertness, attention and energy. Teens turn to these to feel alert and be able to pull all-nighters to stay on top of coursework. Stimulants can make the heart beat faster and put the user at risk for a stroke or heart attack. Some teenagers use stimulants to lose weight. These drugs can be found and are often purchased or stolen from family members and friends with ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder). For this disorder, a stimulant actually can help the brain slow down and focus. Common drug names include Adderall, Dexedrine, Ritalin and Concerta.

Sedatives (tranquilizers) slow down brain activity. The result is a drowsy or calming effect. Other sedatives include tranquilizers and muscle relaxants. Sedatives can reduce heart rate and the body's response to breathing. People use them to feel calmer, to relieve stress or even help them

sleep. Common drug names that fall into this class of drugs include Valium, Xanax, Ativan, Klonopin, Restoril, Ambien, Lunesta, Mebaral, Nembutal and Soma.

Over-the-counter Medicines

Many teens also abuse over-the-counter (OTC) medicines. One of the most commonly abused OTCs includes cough syrup that contains the ingredient “dextromethorphan.” This is a synthetic substance related to codeine. Used correctly it can be an effective cough suppressant. When used in very high doses or mixed with carbonated beverages, it produces dissociative experiences similar to PCP. Other experiences include euphoria, hallucinations and vivid imaginations. With even greater doses, out-of-body experiences or psychosis are possible. Negative side effects include itching, nausea, drowsiness, confusion, hypertension, slurring, slowed breathing, increased heart rate, vomiting, sweating and blurred vision. There are over 100 drugs that contain dextromethorphan (or DEX for short). They include Coricidin HBP Cough and Cold, Triaminic, Dimetapp DM, Robitussin, Sudafed, Vicks NyQuil LiquiCaps, Alka-Seltzer Plus Cold & Cough Medicine, Dayquil LiquiCaps, Vicks Formula 44, Benlyn DM, Pertussin, Tylenol Cold and various other store brands.

What Are Some Warning Signs That Someone Is Abusing Drugs?

People who are addicted to medicines often feel an uncontrollable need for them, even though they know there are negative consequences that follow. Why is it so hard to stop? The answer lies in the brain. A person who abuses drugs for a long time will ultimately create a brain that has changed in how it looks and functions. These changes are what causes the person to have such uncontrollable cravings and compulsions to continue seeking out the drugs, ultimately creating an addiction. This is especially important among teenagers whose brains are developing until 25 and have a predisposition already to seek out high-risk behaviors simply because the brain has not developed yet for mature reasoning.

Some people have a predisposition for developing an addiction and include people with family histories of addictions, abuse/neglect/or other traumatic events in childhood, mental disorders such as depression and anxiety and early use of drugs/alcohol. Sometimes, people can hide their addiction to prescription drugs from loved ones for a long time, and usually they will deny that they have a problem.

Physical signs associated with stimulants:

- Hyperactivity
- Shaking
- Sweating
- Bloodshot eyes or pupils that are larger or smaller than usual
- Fast or irregular heart beat
- Elevated body temperature
- Seizures
- Paranoia/nervousness
- Repetitive behaviors
- Changes in appetite or sleep patterns (sudden weight loss or weight gain)
- Not taking care of yourself, your grooming or how you look
- Tremors, slurred speech or impaired coordination

Physical signs associated with sedatives or depressants:

- Loss of coordination
- Slowed breathing
- Slowed reflexes
- Slurred speech
- Coma

Physical signs associated with opioids (pain killers):

- Sleep deprivation or “nodding”
- Constricted pupils, watery or droopy eyes
- Nausea, vomiting, constipation
- Slow or slurred speech
- Walking slowly
- Dry skin, itching, skin infections
- Constant flu-like symptoms
- Track marks (bruised skin around injection sites)

Behavioral signs:

- Sudden mood changes (i.e., irritability, negative attitude, personality changes)
- Extreme changes in groups of friends (in teenagers even hangout locations)
- Forgetfulness or clumsiness
- Lying or unaccounted time away from home or school
- Avoiding eye contact
- Losing interest in personal appearance, activities or sports
- Sudden changes in appetite (eating too much or not enough)
- Borrowing money or having extra cash
- Acting especially angry or abusive or engaging in reckless behavior
- Visiting pro-drug web sites

What about adults? Oftentimes adults will deny they have a problem. Ask yourself these questions:

- Do you feel like you can’t stop, even if you wanted to?
- Do you ever feel bad or guilty about your medicine use?
- Do you need to use medicines to relax or feel better?
- Do your friends or family members complain or worry about your medicine use?
- Do you hide or lie about your medicine use?
- Have you ever done anything illegal in order to obtain medicine?
- Do you spend money on medicines that you really can’t afford?
- Do you ever use more than one medicine at a time for reasons not immediately prescribed by your doctor?

If you answered “yes” to one or more of the questions, you may have a drug problem.

Risks

Besides the negative consequences of daily living, abusing medicines can increase a person’s risks of hospitalization, acute or chronic ailments, exacerbation of current health issues, drug interactions and even death. With the elderly, the risks are even higher. Elderly people retain

drugs in their system longer because their metabolism slows down and their digestive tract does not work as efficiently as it used to. This means that elderly are more at risk for abuse because a lower dose of a medicine can produce a greater effect. Coupled with behavioral symptoms, elderly people who abuse medicines are more at risk for falling and breaking bones. This takes a longer time for recovery and may even increase the risk of death as usually a senior's independence is compromised. Mood problems are already common among aging adults. Abusing prescription drugs can exacerbate the problem. For example, depression from the loss of a spouse can become exacerbated or prolonged if a person is using medications to withdraw. It can even lead to suicide.

What You Can Do

If You Suspect a Teen Has the Problem

Whether you are a grandparent, parent, teacher or friend to a teenager, you have a great opportunity to stop this growing problem. Teenagers tend to tune parents out, so you can make a connection with them and reinforce healthy lifestyle choices. Teenagers may speak more freely in front of you and you might be able to see changes in a teen before parents do. Here are some things you can do for the teenagers in your life:

- Inform others who work or spend time with teenagers about this problem.
- Act locally. Get yourself involved in bringing speakers in to your community to raise more awareness.
- If you've already established a good rapport with a teenager, take this opportunity to start a dialogue. Questions you can ask are:
 - Has anyone asked if you or your family have any leftover prescription medications that they can have or buy?
 - Have you ever shared your medicine with a friend?
 - What do you and your friends do after school or at parties these days?
 - Do any of your classmates use prescription drugs? Which ones?
- Participate/volunteer in teen clubs that promote healthy behaviors such as SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions). Distribute literature about prescription drug abuse.
- Become trained in presenting on prescription drug abuse and present to your church, to parent teacher associations or anywhere else you think you might make a difference
- Tell other parents about the issue. Be a resource.
- If you overhear teenagers talking about "pharming" parties or specifics about abusing drugs, report it to a school administrator.
- Pay attention to the signs.
- Inform healthcare professionals if this is a problem.
- Store your medicines in your home wisely, as you would your valuables. Lock them up, especially if you have controlled substances. Keep them out of sight, especially if you have teenagers visiting your home or if you will be selling your home.
- Monitor your medicines for pill counts.
- Dispose of medicine when you no longer need it or if it has expired. Sort through your medicines every six month.
- Model proper behavior. Use medicine responsibly, preferably away from children watching you take it.

If You Suspect Another Adult Has This Problem

- Speak up. Tell the person your concerns. Don't wait for the person to hit rock bottom! Support them. However, be prepared for denials and excuses.
- Take care of yourself. Don't put yourself in a dangerous situation (i.e., if the person becomes very angry). Have other people to talk to. Don't get so wrapped up in this person's problems that you lose sight of taking care of yourself.
- NEVER cover for the user. Don't make excuses for them, and don't hide the problem. It's natural to want to be protective of your loved one, but protecting them from the negative consequences of their choices only prevents them from getting the help they desperately need.
- Avoid self blame. You can support a person with a medicine abuse problem, but you can't make them change. Let them accept responsibility for their actions and choices.
- Get involved locally. Bring in speakers to raise awareness of the issue. Involve family and friends.
- Be aware of any life-altering situations in your loved ones lives: death of a loved one, divorce, onset of health-related illness, care givers.
- Store, monitor and dispose your medicine (see above).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the two best things you can do to curb the growing prescription drug abuse problem at any age are to:

1. **TALK ABOUT IT.** By raising awareness, you can prevent the problem.
2. **STORE, MONITOR and DISPOSE** of your medicines correctly. If you don't make it accessible, you are not contributing to the problem.

Evaluation

Tell each participant to turn the survey over that they filled out at the beginning of class and ask them to complete and return the post-survey. Provide evaluations to your county Extension agent – family and consumer sciences.

Thank everyone for taking the time to fill out the survey and inform them their information is anonymous and will greatly serve Extension Service in continuing to provide quality educational information to Arkansans.

Resources

- The National Council for Patient Information and Education, www.talkaboutrx.org. Last accessed July 20, 2010.
- Benschoff, J.J., L. Harrawood and D.S. Koch. Substance abuse and the elderly: Unique issues and concerns. *Journal of Rehabilitation* (2003).
- <http://www.info-drug-rehab.com/dxm.html> A resource for drug and alcohol rehabilitation. Last accessed July 20, 2010.
- Personal communication with The Arkansas State Police, The Little Rock Police and The Arkansas Drug Director.
- National Institute of Drug Abuse. *Trends in prescription drug abuse*. <http://www.nida.nih.gov/researchreports/prescription/prescription5.html>. Last accessed July 20, 2010.
- Partnership for a Drug Free America. <http://www.drugfree.org/>. Last accessed July 20, 2010.
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