

Keeping Your Child Safe from Over-the-Counter and Prescription Drug Abuse

Parents have been aware of the dangers of alcohol, tobacco, marijuana and other drug use by teens and “almost” teens for some time. *There is now another danger that parents must be alert to: the increasing abuse of over-the-counter (OTC) and prescription drugs by our nation’s young people.* When used appropriately, OTC and prescription medicines can be valuable supports to a person’s physical and mental health. But these drugs also have a high potential for abuse.

Young people have gotten the message that there are pills, remedies, potions and preparations to deal with every kind of pain, to change a person’s mood, and to generally smooth out the rough edges of life. And they’re getting this message at a time in their lives when their brains are not fully developed – particularly their brain’s capacity to discern the consequences for their behavior. It’s a time when they are struggling to fit in and appear confident, and are hard-wired for taking risks – good and bad. These cultural and developmental factors can lead to some pretty poor decision-making.

We know preteens and teens, like adults, abuse drugs and alcohol for many reasons. Some teens are ineffectively trying to deal with a wide variety of individual, peer, family, school and other stresses. Some may even be trying to cope with a serious, undiagnosed mental health issue. Young people choose OTC drugs because they are legal, cheap, widely and easily available, and seen as harmless. Young people seek the euphoric (at times hallucinogenic) effects they get when the drugs are taken in amounts that are wildly beyond the manufacturer’s recommended doses. Prescription drugs are similarly abused for the variety of mood-altering effects that they produce. Young people can find these drugs right in the medicine cabinets in their own homes or in the homes of family members and friends. Whatever the reason, young people need help and guidance. The information below is designed to help you provide guidance and support to the young people in your life.

Over-the-Counter Drug Abuse

The **main OTC drugs being abused contain the ingredient dextromethorphan or DXM.** DXM (also known as Triple C; Skittles; Red Devils; Robo; Vitamin D; Tussin and Dex) is a synthetic drug chemically similar to morphine. It has been added to cold and cough medications since the 1970s.

Drugs containing DMX are:

- The most popular drug of choice for teens other than alcohol and marijuana – in middle school it can be the most popular because of easy access
- Often used in combination with alcohol, tobacco and other drugs
- Showing up in teen drug treatment facilities as the presenting addiction

DMX is an ingredient in over 100 non-prescription, OTC drugs including:

- Coricidin HBP®
Cough and Cold
- Vicks Formula 44®
- Some Robitussin® Cough Medicines
- DayQuil®
- Nyquil®
- Alka Seltzer Plus®
- Children’s Tylenol®
- Sucrets®

Other OTC Drugs Abused are:

- Diet pills such as Dexatrim® and Acutrim® (an herbal remedy ephedrine, or ma huang, is also a concern – it has been banned but has found since the ban)
- Sleep aids such as Sominex®
- Tylenol PM® and Excedrin PM®
- Motion sickness tablets such as Dramamine®

Symptoms and Dangers of Abuse

- increased heart rate/heart palpitations
- high blood pressure (leads to stroke in the extreme)
- dry mouth
- numbness in toes and fingers
- dizziness
- headaches
- sleep disturbances
- blurred vision
- dry mouth
- nausea/vomiting
- loss of coordination (accidents)
- hallucinations
- impaired judgment
- hot or cold flashes
- delusions
- paranoia
- depression
- addiction
- blackouts
- seizures
- brain damage
- coma
- death

There is also the issue of underlying health risks that may never have surfaced without the drug abuse. This is similar to the athlete who is injured and goes into cardiac arrest due to an unknown and undetected heart condition.

Prescription Drug Abuse

Prescription drug abuse is a problem among all age groups in our country and is a particular concern with young people. **Three commonly abused types** of prescription drugs are:

- **Narcotic Pain Medications or Opiates** such as Oxycontin®, Vicodin®, and Percocet®)
- **Central Nervous System Depressant Medications** such as Valium®, Xanax® and Quaalude®
- **Central Nervous System Stimulants Medications** such as Ritalin® and Adderal®

Prescription pain medications can be wonder drugs for people suffering incapacitating pain. Similarly, depressant medications, taken for short periods, can address sleep and stress disorders. These medications can be life-savers when monitored by a doctor who is aware of their addictive qualities and possible complications. However, young people who abuse these drugs, typically do so for the immediate high that is created. They have little regard for the drugs tremendous danger: especially the danger of combining OTC drugs, prescriptions drugs, and alcohol.

Stimulants medications pose a special problem. These medications are often legally, and appropriately, prescribed for children and teens to address issues of attention and hyperactivity. Young people can abuse these drugs by stockpiling pills and taking more than the recommended dosage; sharing pills or selling them to friends and classmates; and taking pills with alcohol and other drugs. The alarming results can include rapid and irregular heart beat, cardiovascular failure, strokes, seizures, feelings of paranoia and hostile behavior.

What Parents Can Do to Address OTC and Prescription Drug Abuse

- Keep doing all the great things you are doing!
- Keep the lines of communication open – using teachable moments when things are calm.
- Make sure you have the facts about abuse of OTC and prescription drugs.
- Talk with your child about the dangers of abuse, the serious physical and emotional consequences, and the risks of addiction.
- Know the signs and symptoms of abuse and don't ignore them.
- Make sure everyone in your family understands your values and rules about alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, including OTC and prescription drugs.
- Be aware of the specific medications in your home, read the labels and keep track of how much is in a container.
- Discard unused and expired medications. Make sure these discarded medications are not accessible to young people.
- If you think your child is taking excessive amounts of cold and flu medications, don't ignore it. Ask questions.
- Consider securing medications that are in your home.
- Monitor all OTC and prescription medications your child is taking, including those taken during the school day. Remember to notify and obtain clearance from your child's school regarding any type of medication taken during the school day.
- Know what your child is doing on the internet. Many teens get alcohol and other drugs from the internet. Consider having the computer in a common area, not in your child's bedroom.
- Be in touch with other parents – talk together about what you can do to prevent and detect abuse and to support your children.

Additional Information on the Internet

There is a great deal of information on the internet about alcohol and other drugs (including OTC and prescription drugs) and their effects. Investigating some of the many sites both with and without your child can be very useful. If you don't have access to the internet at home, consider visiting your local library to check out these and other sites.

Sites with Specific Information on OTC and Prescription Drugs:

www.drugfree.org/Parent/Resources/Prescription_Medicine_Misuse

www.freevibe.com/Drug_Facts/prescription_OTC_teen_article.asp

www.freevibe.com

www.theantidrug.com/

www.nida.nih.gov/PrescripAlert/index.html

Other Sites of Interest for Children and Teens:

www.thecoolspot.gov/ - specifically for middle schoolers

www.isafe.org/ and www.netsmartz.org/ - about internet safety

For further information, please contact:

Arlington County Substance Abuse Prevention Services at 703.228-1693 or 703.228-1694