



PRESCRIPTION DRUGS: WEIGHING THE BENEFITS AND THE RISKS

Prescription drugs are the second most abused category of drugs in the United States, following marijuana.¹ When taken as directed for legitimate medical purposes, prescription drugs can be safe and effective. In fact, many people suffer needless pain from disease in the absence of appropriate, medically supervised access to analgesic medicines.

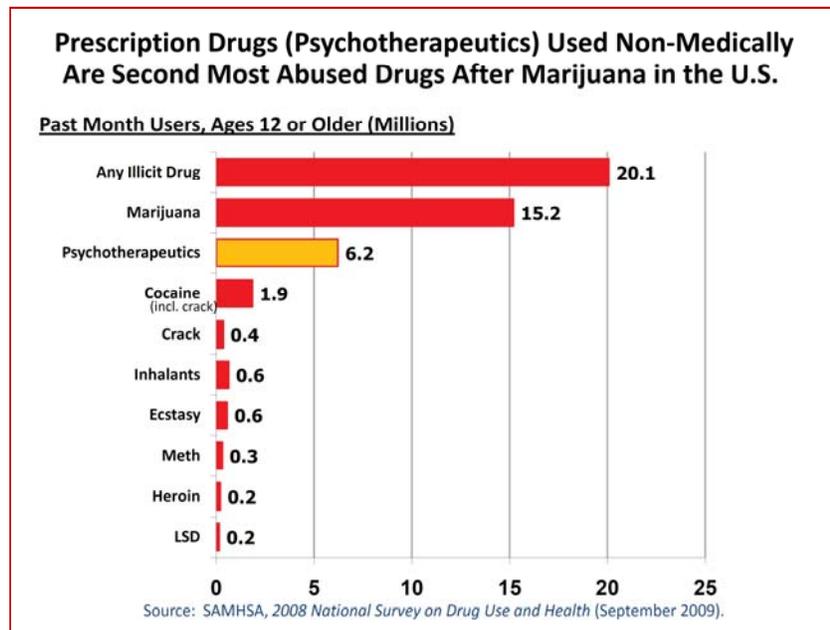
But while we must ensure better access to prescription drugs to alleviate suffering, it is also vital that we do all we can to curtail dangerous diversions and abuse of pharmaceuticals.

Because prescription drugs are legal, they are easily accessible, often from a home medicine cabinet. Further, some individuals who misuse prescription drugs, particularly teens, believe these substances are safer than illicit drugs because they are prescribed by a healthcare professional.

According to the latest *National Survey on Drug Use and Health*, among people age 12 or older who

reported using pain relievers non-medically in the past year, 56 percent got the drug they most recently used from a friend or relative for free. Another 18 percent reported getting the drug from one doctor. Only about 4 percent reported obtaining pain relievers from a drug dealer or other stranger, and less than half of one-percent bought the drugs on the Internet. Among those who said they got the pain reliever from a friend or relative for free, 82 percent reported that the friend or relative had obtained the drugs from just one doctor.²

It is important, therefore, that we properly dispose of prescription drugs and not leave them where they can be used for non-medical reasons.



ONDCP seeks to foster healthy individuals and safe communities by effectively leading the Nation's effort to reduce drug use and its consequences.

The most commonly misused prescription drugs fall into three classes³:

- **Opioids** include oxycodone (OxyContin), hydrocodone (Vicodin), and meperidine (Demerol)
- **Central nervous system (CNS) depressants** include pentobarbital (Nembutal), diazepam (Valium), and alprazolam (Xanax)
- **Stimulants** include methylphenidate (Ritalin) and amphetamine/dextroamphetamine (Adderall)

Between 1998 and 2008, treatment admissions for prescription painkillers increased 460 percent, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).⁴

By taking a few simple steps, all of us can help decrease the abuse of pharmaceuticals:

- Parents can educate their children about the dangers of misusing pharmaceuticals. Simply because a drug is prescribed by a doctor does not make it safe if abused. On the contrary, these drugs can be dangerous and even deadly.
- Prescription drugs that are no longer needed should be disposed of properly, such as through a community take-back program conducted with law enforcement officials. People without access to a take-back program can follow these suggestions for proper disposal of prescription drugs:
 1. Take your prescription drugs out of their original containers.
 2. Mix drugs with an undesirable substance, such as cat litter or used coffee grounds.
 3. Put the mixture into a disposable container with a lid, such as an empty margarine tub, or into a sealable bag.
 4. Conceal or remove any personal information, including Rx number, on the empty containers by covering it with black permanent marker or duct tape, or by scratching it off.
 5. Place the sealed container with the mixture, and the empty drug containers, in the trash.
- Do not flush prescription drugs down the toilet or drain unless the label or accompanying patient information specifically instructs you to do so.
- For information on medicines that should be flushed, please visit:
<http://www.fda.gov/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/BuyingUsingMedicineSafely/EnsuringSafeUseofMedicine/SafeDisposalofMedicines/ucm186187.htm>

¹ Results from the 2008 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH): National Findings, SAMHSA (2009).

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³ All brand names and trademarks are properties of their respective holders.

⁴ Treatment Episode Data Set (TEDS) 1998-2008, SAMHSA (2010): Admissions by primary substance of abuse.