



Taking ACTION to prevent & address PRESCRIPTION DRUG ABUSE



EDUCATE *before*
YOU MEDICATE

The NCPIC
Coalition-working
together to promote
safe medicine use

National Council on Patient Information and Education
www.talkaboutrx.org



A Resource Kit for America's College Campuses

Myth Busters: 6 Myths about Prescription Drug Abuse

MYTH #1: Prescription medications are safer to abuse than other illicit substances.

TRUTH: Studies consistently show that teens and young people of college-age think prescription medications are a safer alternative to illicit street drugs like cocaine or heroin. After all, they are FDA approved and many have seen their moms, dads, grandparents and other family members take these very same medications under their doctor's care to treat a variety of illnesses. So, how bad can they be? Very.

When misused or taken without a doctor's prescription, these drugs can be just as harmful as illegal street drugs. Taking these medications together with alcohol or other drugs—as many college students do to amplify or “cancel out” their effects—can have grave and possibly deadly consequences.

“The abuse of prescription drugs is every bit as dangerous as abusing other substances. They do NOT offer a safe way to get high, cope with stress or perform better at school or on the field.”

It's a slippery slope. Research shows that students who take prescription drugs for non-medical reasons are at least five times more likely to develop a drug abuse problem than those who don't (McCabe, 2008). So when academic and social pressures mount, encourage your friends and peers to keep it together and find healthy ways to deal with stress and avoid peer pressure.

When talking to them, you might say: Prescription drugs are very powerful medications. If you take these medications inappropriately or without a prescription, there is no telling how they may affect you. Abusing these drugs can stop your heart, your breathing or both. Bottom line: The abuse of prescription drugs is every bit as dangerous as abusing other substances. They do NOT offer a safe way to get high, cope with stress or perform better at school or on the field.

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MYTH #2: Unlike underage binge drinking and marijuana use, misusing and sharing prescription medications is legal.

TRUTH: Many students may not realize that they are doing anything wrong if they pop a friend's Percocet (a pain reliever) to relieve a headache or take Adderall (a stimulant) to cram for exams all night. But using these medications, many of which are considered controlled substances, without a doctor's prescription or misusing someone else's prescription is always harmful, not to mention illegal. Only a doctor or pharmacist can legally give you these medications.

If you take a prescription for a legitimate medical reason, don't share these medications with anyone, regardless of the reason. You could unknowingly be putting your friends at risk if you share your medicine. So, keep your medications in a safe and secure spot. If a college roommate sprains his/her ankle and pleads with you for a Percocet, or perhaps asks for an Adderall or Ritalin to pull a dreaded all nighter, stay strong. Instead of "sharing" a pain reliever, make sure your friend sees a healthcare professional for care.

MYTH #3: Everyone is doing it.

TRUTH: When asked, most college students tend to overestimate their peers' non-medical use of prescription drugs. This might actually make it more likely for some students to justify engaging in this behavior; they might think, "Hey, no big deal, everyone is doing it and these drugs are safe anyway."

The reality is that most college students know it's not worth the risk to misuse or abuse prescription medications. Only one in four people aged 18 to 20 report using these medications nonmedically at least once in their lives. But it is a growing issue on campus and the pressure to take these medications is real. By students' sophomore year in college, about half of their classmates will have been offered the opportunity to abuse a prescription drug (NSDUH, 2008; Arria, 2008).

MYTH #4: Students often get prescription medications from drug dealers on the street.

TRUTH: Most students don't need to look any further than their friends, classmates and family. That's because many of the most abused prescription medications are widely prescribed for legitimate medical conditions are, therefore, readily available. A majority (90%) of students are able to access stimulants from their peers or friends (McCabe *et al*, 2004). Of undergraduates that are taking stimulant medication under the direction of their doctor, more than half (54%) have been asked to sell, trade or give away their medication in the past year (McCabe *et al*, 2006).

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It's important to remember that these medicines, when taken as intended, are very helpful to a lot of patients. While these prescription medications have the potential for addiction and abuse when misused and abused, when taken as prescribed and under the care of a healthcare professional who can monitor the risks, they are very valuable and can help improve quality of life. Many college students also take medications that are prescribed to them by a doctor either at home or at the campus health center to treat a variety of medical conditions.

REMEMBER THE 3 Rs FOR SAFE MEDICINE USE

Respect the power of medicine and use it properly.

Recognize that all medicines, including prescription drugs, have risks along with benefits. The risks tend to increase dramatically when medicines are abused.

Take **responsibility** for learning how to take prescription drugs safely and appropriately. Seek help at the first sign of your own or a friend's problem. Contact or visit your college health center if you have questions or need advice.

MYTH #5: Nothing bad will happen to me or my friends.

TRUTH: This is very dangerous thinking. The reality is that every college student—even the most accomplished—is vulnerable.

Once away from home, students are subject to the temptations and demands of college life without parental supervision and support. While some students abuse prescription medications to feel good or get high, plenty of others turn to these medications to help manage their daily lives—to reduce the stress and anxiety of college life, boost their mood, stay up all night writing a term paper or increase their stamina while playing sports.

College students report misusing or abusing prescription medications to:

- Improve their grades
- Concentrate more in class and maintain focus during late-night study sessions and all nighters
- Diet
- Reduce stress
- Feel good/get high
- Ease nervousness in social scene / partying
- Enhance athletic performance
- Forget about problems

(McCabe 2005; NCASA, 2007; White *et al*, 2006)

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Research shows that students who take prescription drugs for non-medical reasons are at least five times more likely to develop a drug abuse problem than those who don't.

Understanding why college students misuse or abuse prescription drugs can help student leaders, parents, campus life administrators and advisors, coaches and healthcare professionals ask the right questions and intervene early.

When talking to friends or peers: Try to empathize with the pressures of college life and offer healthy tips and strategies for dealing with stress. For example, exercising, eating well or seeking counseling to help manage anxiety. Help bolster their self-esteem by encouraging them to focus on things they are good at or enjoy, like playing sports, joining clubs, or volunteering in the community.

MYTH #6: Misusing prescription drugs is fine “every once and a while,” and doing so can help me better manage my life and feel better.

TRUTH: Teens and young adults may perceive prescription drugs to be safer than illicit drugs largely because doctors prescribe them and messages about their use are widely available in popular media like movies or television and magazine advertisements. But these drugs are just as dangerous as street drugs and, because most addictions start during adolescence, experimenting with prescription medications or any other drug can be a very dangerous path. Research shows that students who take prescription drugs for non-medical reasons are at least five times more likely to develop a drug abuse problem than those who don't (McCabe, 2008).

When talking to friends or peers, you might say: When certain prescription drugs are abused, they can be as addictive and dangerous as street drugs. Taking these medications without a prescription or medical supervision—even once—can lead to serious problems, such as overdose and even death, especially if they are mixed with alcohol, marijuana and other drugs.