Warning Signs & Symptoms of Prescription Drug Abuse

Because college students are frequently exposed to opportunities to experiment with, misuse and abuse so many different types of prescriptions drugs—from stimulants and pain relievers to anti-depressants and tranquilizers—it can be difficult to know what signs to watch for. Each medication has different effects, and mixing these drugs with alcohol and other drugs is very dangerous and can lead to permanent organ damage and even death.

Know the signs that might signal prescription drug abuse.

Physical Signs and Symptoms

Depending on the drug misused or abused you may notice the following.

**Stimulants** are prescribed to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or narcolepsy; these medications, which include Adderall, Concerta and Ritalin speed up brain activity causing increased alertness, attention, and energy that comes with elevated blood pressure, increased heart rate and breathing.

- Hyperactivity
- Shaking
- Sweating
- Dilated pupils
- Fast or irregular heart beat
- Elevated body temperature
- Seizures
- Paranoia/nervousness
- Repetitive behaviors
- Loss of appetite or sudden and unexplained weight loss

**Sedatives/depressants** are prescribed to treat anxiety, panic attacks and sleep disorders; these medications (Valium, Xanax, Ambien are examples) slow down or “depress” the functions of the brain and central nervous system.

- Loss of coordination
- Respiratory depression
- Slowed reflexes
- Slurred speech
- Coma
Opioid analgesics like Vicodin, OxyContin and Percocet are prescribed to treat moderate-to-severe pain; these medications can block pain messages from reaching the brain; they can also give someone a feeling of euphoria.

**Behavioral Signs**

Behavior changes may also include:

- Sudden mood changes, including irritability, negative attitude, personality change
- Extreme changes in groups of friends or hangout locations
- Forgetfulness or clumsiness
- Lying or being deceitful, skipping classes, avoiding eye contact
- Losing interest in personal appearance, extracurricular activities or sports
- "Munchies" or sudden changes in appetite
- Unusually poor performance in school, on the field, in debate club or other activities
- Borrowing money or having extra cash
- Acting especially angry or abusive, or engaging in reckless behavior

HELP IS AVAILABLE

If you suspect a friend, roommate or peer is abusing prescription drugs, there is help.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)  
Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT)  
240-276-2750

www.csat.samhsa.gov

The Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT) of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), promotes the quality and availability of community-based substance abuse treatment services for individuals and families who need them. CSAT works with States and community-based groups to improve and expand existing substance abuse treatment services under the Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment Block Grant Program. CSAT also supports SAMHSA’s free treatment referral service to link people with the community-based substance abuse services they need.

SAMHSA’s National Helpline  
800-662-HELP (800-662-4357) (English and Spanish)  
800-487-4889 (TDD)

Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator:  
800-662-HELP (800-662-4357) (English and Spanish)  
www.samhsa.gov/treatment