



Warning Signs and Symptoms of Prescription Drug Abuse

Because teens may misuse and abuse different types of prescription drugs—from stimulants and painkillers to anti-depressants and anti-seizure drugs—it can be difficult to know what signs to what for. Each drug has different effects, and mixing these drugs—which some teens do at “pharming” or “bowling” parties—is very dangerous and can lead to permanent organ damage and even death. And they aren’t just swallowing pills. Teens are also abusing prescription drugs by combining them with alcohol and/or crushing pills and then snorting or injecting them to get a quicker, more intense high.

Know the signs that may point to prescription drug abuse. Be observant and intervene early if you think your child, student or patient may have a problem with prescription drugs or other substances.

Physical Signs and Symptoms

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

Stimulants (medications used to speed up brain activity causing increased alertness, attention, and energy that come with elevated blood pressure, increased heart rate and breathing)

- Hyperactivity
- Shaking
- Sweating
- Dilated pupils
- Fast or irregular heart beat
- Elevated body temperature

Sedatives/depressants (medications used to 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

(medications used to treat moderate-to-severe pain)

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

Behavioral Signs

Behavior changes may 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, unaccounted time away from home/missed school days, 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
- Visiting pro-drug websites

All of these drugs can be addictive and cause serious withdrawal symptoms when stopped.

Combinations of these drugs or if paired with alcohol or other substances can result in permanent organ damage or premature death.

If you or someone you know takes any of these or other prescription medications, make sure to keep them safely stored and out of children’s sight. Properly dispose of any unused or expired pills. If you notice that pills or bottles are missing, take the necessary steps to talk with your teens and provide supportive counsel.

Information sources: National Council on Patient Information and Education and The Partnership for Drug-Free Kids, now part of Center on Addiction.

Learn more at www.PreventionWorksCT.org