



PREScription DRUGS: WEIGHING THE BENEFITS AND THE RISKS

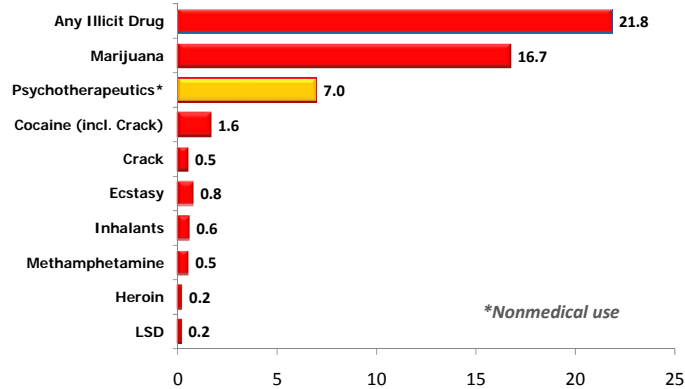
Prescription drugs are the second-most abused category of drugs in the United States, following marijuana.¹ When taken as directed for legitimate medical purposes, prescription drugs can be safe and effective.

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 diversion and abuse of pharmaceuticals.

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

Prescription Drugs (Psychotherapeutics) Used Non-Medically Are Second Most Abused Drugs After Marijuana in the U.S.

Past Month Users, Aged 12 or Older (Millions)



Source: SAMHSA, 2009 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (September 2010).

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According to the 2009 *National Survey on Drug Use and Health*, among people age 12 or older who reported using pain relievers non-medically in the past year, 55 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 5 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, 80 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 easily diverted and abused.

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)

Prescription Drug Fast Facts

- Nearly one-third (29%) of people age 12 or older who used illicit drugs for the first time in the past year began by using prescription drugs non-medically.⁴
- Among 12th graders, prescription drugs used non-medically are seven of the most-abused substances.⁵
- From 1998 to 2008, the proportion of all substance abuse treatment admissions aged 12 or older that reported any pain reliever abuse increased more than fourfold.⁶
- According to a 2008 Department of Defense survey, past-month use of illicit drugs among active duty military personnel was 2.3 percent; misuse of prescription drugs was 11.1 percent.⁷
- The estimated number of emergency department visits linked to non-medical use of prescription pain relievers more than doubled between 2004 and 2008.⁸
- Approximately two million adults age 50 and older (2.1 percent of adults in that age range) used prescription-type drugs non-medically in the past year. Misuse of prescription drugs is more pervasive than marijuana use among those 65 and older, the only age group for which this is true.⁹
- Older substance abuse treatment admissions (age 50 or older) nearly doubled from 1992 to 2008, climbing from 6.6 percent of all admissions to 12.2 percent. The percentage of older admissions for prescription drug abuse increased from 0.7 percent to 3.5 percent over the same time period.¹⁰
- Among people age 12 or older in 2008-2009 who used pain relievers non-medically in the past 12 months:¹¹
 - 55.3 percent recently got the pain relievers from a friend or relative for free.
 - 9.9 percent bought the drugs from a friend or relative.
 - 5.0 percent took them from a friend or relative without asking.
 - 17.6 percent indicated they got the drugs they used most recently through a prescription from one doctor.
 - 4.8 percent got the pain relievers from a drug dealer or other stranger.
 - 0.4 percent bought the drugs on the Internet.
- Prescription painkillers are considered a major contributor to the total number of drug deaths. In 2007, for example, approximately 28,000 Americans died from unintentional drug overdoses.¹²
- In 2009, an estimated 24 million Americans age 12 or older needed treatment for an illicit drug or alcohol abuse problem; only about 10 percent received the necessary treatment.¹³

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Reducing Prescription Drug Abuse

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 2009 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH): National Findings, SAMHSA (2010).

² Results from the 2009 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH): National Findings, SAMHSA (2010).

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

⁴ Results from the 2009 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH): National Findings, SAMHSA (2010).

⁵ University of Michigan, 2009 Monitoring the Future: A Synopsis of the 2009 Results of Trends in Teen Use of Illicit Drugs and Alcohol.

⁶ Findings from SAMHSA's Treatment Episode Data Set (TEDS) for 1998 and 2008.

⁷ Bray et al., 2008 Department of Defense Survey of Health Related Behaviors Among Active Duty Military Personnel (2009). Research Triangle Institute, Research Triangle Park, NC.

⁸ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Office of Applied Studies. (June 18, 2010). *The DAWN Report: Trends in Emergency Department Visits Involving Nonmedical Use of Narcotic Pain Relievers*. Rockville, MD. See <http://www.oas.samhsa.gov/2k10/DAWN016/OpioidED.htm>

⁹ NSDUH Report, *Illicit Drug Use Among Older Adults*, December 29, 2009.

¹⁰ SAMHSA 2009 The TEDS Report, *Changing Substance Abuse Patterns among Older Admissions: 1992-2008*.

¹¹ Results from the 2009 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH): National Findings, SAMHSA (2010).

¹² *Unintentional Drug Poisoning in the United States*, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, July 2010.

¹³ Results from the 2009 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH): National Findings, SAMHSA (2010).



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