

# Prescription Drugs

## What Are the Common Misconceptions About Prescription Drug Abuse?

There's a reason that prescription drugs are intended to be taken under the direction of a doctor: if used improperly they can be dangerous. Teens are making the decision to abuse prescription medicines based on misinformation. In fact, many people think that abusing prescription drugs is safer than abusing illicit drugs. As the facts will tell you, prescription drugs can have dangerous short- and long-term health consequences when used incorrectly or by someone other than for whom they were intended.

Virtually every medication presents some risk of undesirable side effects, sometimes even serious ones. Doctors consider the potential benefits and risks to each patient before prescribing medications. They understand that drugs affect the body in many ways and take into account things like the drug's form and dose, its possible side effects, and the potential for addiction or withdrawal. People who abuse drugs might not understand how these factors may affect them or that prescription drugs do more than cause a high, help them stay awake, help them relax, or relieve pain.

## Common Street Names for Prescription Drugs:

Opinoids: Chemical Name	Opinoids: Street Name
Oxycodone (OxyContin, Percodan, Percocet) Propoxyphene (Darvon) Hydrocodone (Vicodin, Lortab, Lorcet) Hydromorphone (Dilaudid) Meperidine (Demerol) Diphenoxylate (Lomotil) Morphine (Kadian, Avinza, MS Contin) Codeine Fentanyl (Duragesic) Methadone	Hillbilly heroin, oxy, OC, oxycotton, percs, happy pills, vikes
Stimulants: Chemical Name	Stimulants: Street Name
Dextroamphetamine (Dexedrine, Adderall) Methylphenidate (Ritalin, Concerta)	Skippy, the smart drug, Vitamin R, bennies, black beauties, roses, hearts, speed, uppers
Depressants: Chemical Name	Depressants: Street Name
Barbiturates Mephobarbital (Mebaral) Sodium pentobarbital (Nembutal)	Barbs, reds, red birds, phennies, tooies, yellows, yellow jackets
Benzodiazepines Diazepam (Valium) Alprazolam (Xanax) Triazolam (Halcion) Estazolam (ProSom) Clonazepam (Klonopin) Lorazepam (Ativan) Chlordiazepoxide hydrochloride (Librium)	Candy, downers, sleeping pills, tranks
Sleep Medications Zolpidem (Ambien) Zaleplon (Sonata) Eszopiclone (Lunesta)	A-minus, zombie pills



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## What's Wrong With Abusing Prescription Drugs?

**Form and dose.** Doctors know how long it takes for a pill or capsule to dissolve in the stomach, release drugs to the bloodstream, and reach the brain. They also take into account a person's weight, how long they've been prescribed the medication, and what other medications they are taking. When abused, prescription drugs may be taken in inappropriate doses or by routes of administration that change the way the drugs act in the body, risking overdose.

**Side effects.** Prescription drugs are designed to treat a particular illness or condition, but they often have other side effects on the body, some of which can be dangerous. For example, OxyContin stops pain, but it also causes constipation and drowsiness and slows breathing. Stimulants such as Adderall increase attention but also raise blood pressure and heart rate. These side effects can be made worse when prescription drugs are not taken as prescribed or are abused in combination with other substances—including alcohol, other prescription drugs, and even over-the-counter drugs, such as cold medicines.

For instance, some people mix alcohol and benzodiazepines (e.g., Valium), both of which can slow breathing. This combination could stop breathing altogether, requiring emergency care, or worse—it could be fatal.

**Addiction.** Studies show that when people take a medication as it is prescribed for a medical condition—such as pain or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)—they usually do not become addicted, because the medication is prescribed in dosages and forms that are considered safe for that person. The drug is compensating for a problem, which makes the person feel better, not high. But medications that affect the brain can change the way it functions—especially when they are taken repeatedly or in large doses. They can alter the reward system, making it harder to feel good without the drug and can lead to intense cravings, which make it hard to stop using.

**Withdrawal.** Taking drugs repeatedly over a period of time can cause changes in the body as well as the brain, resulting in physical dependence (which is different from addiction). That is, the body adapts to the drug's presence, and when its use is abruptly stopped, the person can experience withdrawal symptoms. This can happen even in someone who is prescribed medications and takes them appropriately—which is why a physician should be consulted when stopping prescription medications as well as when starting them.



## Pharm Party or Fishbowl Party

**Definition:** At these parties, teens will drop an array of pills into a bowl, then pass around the *trail mix* for the party goes to *graze*.

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## **Aren't Prescription Drugs Safer Than Illegal Drugs, Such as Cocaine or Heroin?**

Many people think that abusing prescription drugs is safer than abusing illicit drugs like heroin because the manufacturing of prescription drugs is regulated or because they are prescribed by doctors. That's true, but it doesn't mean that these drugs are safe for someone who was not prescribed the drug or when they are taken in ways other than as prescribed.

Prescription drugs can have powerful effects in the brain and body, and they act on the same brain sites as illicit drugs. Opioid painkillers act on the same sites in the brain as heroin; prescription stimulants have effects in common with cocaine. And people sometimes take the medications in ways that can be very dangerous in both the short and long term (e.g., crushing pills and snorting or injecting the contents). Also, abusing prescription drugs is illegal—and that includes sharing prescriptions with friends.

## **What About Over-the-Counter Drugs, Like Cough Medicine? Aren't They Safer Than Prescription Drugs?**

Cough and cold medications are some of the most commonly abused over-the-counter (OTC) medications. Many contain an ingredient called dextromethorphan (DXM). However, to get the "high" or "dissociative" state craved by people who use drugs, large quantities are needed. At high doses, DXM causes effects similar to that of the drugs ketamine or PCP by affecting similar sites in the brain. Ketamine and PCP are considered "dissociative" drugs, which make people feel disconnected from their normal selves. They affect memory, feelings, and thoughts. DXM is similar, and its abuse can affect control over movement; cause numbness, nausea, and vomiting; and can increase heart rate and blood pressure.

When taken as directed, OTCs are safe and effective, but high doses can cause problems. And, some OTC medications can produce dangerous health effects when taken with alcohol. It is important to understand these risks, read the bottle labels, and take OTC medications only as directed.

