

## Prescription Drug Abuse (II): What Can Be Done?

Prescription drug abuse affects the young and old alike. In 2001, 3.2 percent of youth ages 12 to 17 were current (past month) abusers of prescription drugs. This was a slight increase from 2000. But the increase of those youth who misused psychotherapeutics at least once in the year was larger—from 7.1 percent to 7.9 percent. Among college age young adults 18 to 25, misuse of prescription drugs went from 9.3 percent in 2000 to 12.1 percent in 2001—a 33 percent increase. Painkillers—such as oxycodone (OxyContin) and hydrocodone (Vicodin) account for most of these increases. In 1993, the Drug Enforcement Agency estimated prescription drugs sold illegally cost abusers \$25 billion (compared to \$31 billion spent that year on cocaine).

### Doctors

About 47 percent of physicians find it difficult to discuss prescription drug abuse with their patients. Doctors need to carefully evaluate patients before administering opiates and other controlled substances, and continue monitoring them for development of tolerance to the drug. They should alert patients to the hazards of taking prescription medications that can become addictive and to the harms of multiple drug use or use with alcohol.

Doctors should also be on the lookout for “doctor shopping” by patients addicted to prescription medication who move from provider to provider to get multiple prescriptions. At the same time, doctors should not overreact. Fifty million Americans suffer chronic pain. Studies show that among those who do not abuse illicit drugs, abusing prescription drugs is uncommon. One study showed only 4 out of 12,000 patients given opioids for acute pain became addicted.

### Pharmacists

Pharmacists can help prevent prescription fraud by looking for false or altered prescription forms and using hotlines to alert other pharmacists in the region when fraud is detected. Pharmacists need to be active observers of patient histories. They can advise patients to dispose of unused medications (no prescription over a year old should be in the medicine chest).

### Patients

Patients should not increase dosages on their own or use another person’s prescription.

### Parents

Parents should lock their medicine cabinets. No child should give himself or herself prescription drugs, but rather a parent or guardian according to doctor’s directions.

### Schools

School nurses should administer medications. Students should not be allowed to self-medicate or give such drugs to others. Workshops on prescription drug abuse should take place each school year and involve students themselves.

Teachers and parents can utilize media literacy methods to draw students’ attention to the harmfulness of misusing prescription drugs. For example, a student at a recent drug abuse prevention conference noted that on a TV show named for a pair of fictitious friends, “They constantly pop pills for one thing or another. They seem to be having fun and they see no problem with it. Kids watch that.”

### Communities

Community organizations can create television and radio public service announcements of the dangers of misusing prescription drugs, using tragic local stories to illustrate the harm. Evidence-based youth-oriented curricula for school classrooms should be developed, along with presentations for PTA meetings, and posters, brochures and other literature.

### Law enforcement and governing bodies

Police officers need to identify and apprehend those “diverting” prescription medications from the legal market. Many states have surprisingly mild penalties for prescription forgery; the passage of stronger laws on fraud may deter those who would fabricate prescriptions.

### Sources:

*Results from the 2001 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse*, SAMHSA, 2002. *Prescription Drug Abuse and Addiction*, National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2001. *Prescription Drug Abuse Prevention: Where Do We Go from Here? (Strategizer)*, Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America (CADCA), 2003. *Final Report, CADCA’s Prescription Drug Abuse Initiative Community Forums, 2002-2003*. “Painfully Obvious” Youth Prescription Drug Abuse Prevention Kit, Purdue Pharma, 2003 [www.painfullyobvious.com](http://www.painfullyobvious.com). Colorado Prescription Drug Task Force, 303-299-0113, [www.corxtaskforce.org](http://www.corxtaskforce.org).



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