



# Prescription Abuse

Prescription drugs can help, but if misused can also hurt. Although there have been historic declines in alcohol use, binge drinking, and cigarette smoking among Florida middle and high school students, the opposite is happening with the opioid epidemic; it continues to worsen dramatically in Florida and across the nation. Most teens say they haven't taken a prescription drug without having a prescription, but sadly the few who do are taking a much greater risk than they realize.

## WHAT IS PRESCRIPTION DRUG ABUSE?

Prescription drugs (legal medications) are intended to make people who have a condition or illness better – to get their brain or body back to a healthy or 'normal' balance. If a person uses a drug not prescribed to them, in a manner other than prescribed (such as using more than the amount prescribed), or for the experience/feeling the drug can cause, they are misusing or abusing it. It's no different than abusing alcohol or illegal drugs. People who misuse are at risk for serious health consequences, because prescription medications create an altered state, physically, and mentally.

## WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT THEM? THE FACTS ARE...

Prescription medicines are usually safe when used correctly under a doctor's supervision. But using prescription drugs that aren't intended for you or mixing them with any amount of alcohol or illicit drugs, is illegal and can result in serious legal issues, health problems, and even death.

Most abused prescription drugs fall under categories and each produce different health risks:

- **Painkillers:** Opioids and morphine derivatives are generally referred to as painkillers. These drugs contain opium or opium-like substances and are used to relieve pain and can be extremely addictive, because they work in the same brain areas as heroin. You might think abusing legal prescription drugs is less risky than illegal heroin, but it can be more dangerous due to the high potency of some of the synthetic (man-made) drugs. The potency creates a significant overdose risk, as seen with painkillers such as OxyContin that has caused overdose deaths to more than double over a 5-year period.
- **Tranquilizers, Depressants, or Sedatives:** Often referred to as central nervous system (brain and spinal cord) depressants, these drugs slow brain function and are used to make a person calm, drowsy, or less anxious. Because they slow breathing and heart rate, if abused, they can be fatal - especially if combined with certain prescription pain medicines, alcohol, or over-the-counter cold remedies.
- **Stimulants:** A class of drugs intended to increase energy and alertness, but which also increases blood pressure, heart rate, and breathing. If misused, stimulants can cause irregular heartbeats or deadly seizures. Due to their potential for abuse and addiction, many stimulant drugs such as Ritalin and Dexedrine have been categorized by the US Drug Enforcement Administration in the same category as opium or cocaine.
- **Over-the-Counter-Drugs:** Although not prescribed, over-the-counter medicines are still drugs and can be abused. Cold and cough medicines for example, contain the drug Dextromethorphan (DXM) which can be addictive and when taken in excess can act as a dissociative anesthetic, mimicking the effects of drugs like PCP and Ketamine.

### Short-Term Effects

In the short term, adolescents' misuse of prescription drugs has been associated with having sex without a condom, having four or more sexual partners, and experiencing dating violence. Prescription abuse can also result in overdosing and if assistance isn't received can be fatal. Purchasing and taking any online medicine is particularly risky because of their uncertain composition and dosage. Mixing prescription drugs with over-the-counter medication and/or alcohol can be particularly lethal. Drug overdoses killed 63,632 Americans in 2016.

*Prescription drug misuse and overdose deaths have become the leading cause of injury death in the U.S.*

## Long-Term Effects

Our brain goes through significant development during the teen and young adult years and doesn't stop growing until about age 25. So, prescription opioids (pain relievers) and other medicines can be particularly addictive to a youth's developing brain.

As part of the addiction cycle, prescription drug misuse and overdose deaths have become the leading cause of injury death in the United States, surpassing the number of deaths by motor vehicles and firearms every year since 2008. Overdose deaths, particularly from prescription drugs and heroin, have reached epidemic levels.

## WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

### Students

To prevent the potential problems caused by prescription drug abuse, know how you will turn down the offer before it comes. Create a one-liner you feel comfortable saying to a friend, such as "no thanks, not my thing." You can also suggest an alternate healthy activity or leave the area. If you're misusing prescription drugs - stop. The longer you ignore the facts and its effects, the more chances you take with your health and well-being. Find a healthy replacement behavior and learn how to live above the influence of negative ones at [abovetheinfluence.com](http://abovetheinfluence.com). Although initially using may seem to make a problem smaller, it only postpones the problem and creates many more. If you need help in stopping, talk to your parents, a doctor, a counselor, a teacher, or another adult you trust or call SAMHSA's National Helpline at 1-800-662-HELP (4357). This helpline can also be used to assist a friend seeking professional help. The sooner you acknowledge the problem, the better your chances are of overcoming it. To learn more about prescription drug misuse, go to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) for Teens website at [teens.drugabuse.gov](http://teens.drugabuse.gov).

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### Parents

Stay informed, know the risks, and don't minimize the potential damage caused by prescription drug misuse. Although most teens aren't abusing prescription drugs, know the signs of use to keep your children safe. You are the most important influence in your child's life. Most teens abusing prescription drugs are getting them from the medicine cabinets of friends and family. Some teens traffic among themselves – handing out or selling "extra" pills of their own, or pills they've acquired or stolen from classmates. A very small minority of teens say they get their prescription drugs illicitly from doctors, pharmacists or over the Internet.

What should parents do?

1. Educate yourself. Go to the National Council on Patient Information and Education (NCPIE) website, [BeMedWise.org](http://BeMedWise.org), to access patient information and education on prescriptions or download the Prescription Medication Toolkit for Parents ([drugfreebroward.org](http://drugfreebroward.org)) from the Prescription Drug Abuse Task Force United Way of Broward County Commission on Substance Abuse.
2. Communicate the risks of prescription drug abuse to your kids. Children who learn a lot about the risks of drugs are up to 50% less likely to use drugs. Find more information at The Partnership for Drug-Free Kids at [drugfree.org](http://drugfree.org) or call their Parents Toll-Free Helpline 1-855-DRUGFREE. Additional resources can be found at the National Family Partnership ([nfp.org](http://nfp.org)) or the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIH)'s site just for parents ([drugabuse.gov](http://drugabuse.gov)).
3. Safeguard your own medicines. Keep your prescriptions in a secure place, monitor the number of pills you have, and learn how to dispose of unused medications safely at the FDA's Safe Disposal of Unused Medication website ([fda.gov/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/Consumers](http://fda.gov/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/Consumers)).
4. Role model for your child responsible prescription use. If you fear you or your child has a problem with drug use, find a local professional who specializes in addiction by dialing 211 to reach Broward's 211 First Call for Help information and referral hotline.

### Teachers

Help your students learn healthy ways to cope with difficult feelings other than turning to drugs. Use Broward County's Above the Influence Toolkit ([browardschools.com/ati](http://browardschools.com/ati)) or go to the national Above the Influence website ([abovetheinfluence.com](http://abovetheinfluence.com)).

Additional curriculum and resources can be found in the School Climate & Discipline Resources SharePoint or at [HealthTeacher.com](http://HealthTeacher.com).

**For more information, links and resources go to [BrowardPrevention.org](http://BrowardPrevention.org).**

*Sources: National Institute on Drug Abuse; National Institutes of Health; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Above the Influence [abovetheinfluence.com](http://abovetheinfluence.com). SAMHSA Tips for Teens <http://store.samhsa.gov>. Drugfreeworld.org Truth About Alcohol. CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Survey and Surveillance Report. Florida Youth Substance Abuse Survey. Florida Medical Examiners Commission Drug Report.*