



Community Program

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Most people who take prescription medications use them responsibly. But when abused, prescription medications can produce serious adverse health effects, including addiction.

Commonly Abused Prescription Medications

Although many prescription medications can be abused, the following three classes are most commonly abused:

- **Opioids**—usually prescribed to treat pain.
- **CNS depressants**—used to treat anxiety and sleep disorders.

- **Stimulants**—prescribed to treat ADHD and narcolepsy.

What Are Opioids?

Opioids are analgesic, or pain-relieving, medications.

Among the compounds that fall within this class are hydrocodone (e.g., Vicodin), oxycodone (e.g., OxyContin — an oral, controlled-release form of the drug), morphine, fentanyl, codeine, and related medications. Morphine and fentanyl are often used to alleviate severe pain, while codeine is used for milder pain. Other examples of opioids prescribed to relieve pain include propoxyphene (Darvon); and hydromorphone (Dilaudid).

How Are Opioids Abused?

Opioids can be taken orally, or the pills may be crushed and the powder snorted or injected. A number of overdose deaths have resulted from the latter routes of administration, particularly with the drug OxyContin, which was designed to be a slow-release formulation. Snorting or injecting opioids results in the rapid release of the drug into the bloodstream, exposing the person to high doses and causing

many of the reported overdose reactions.

What Are CNS Depressants?

CNS depressants (e.g., tranquilizers, sedatives) are medications that slow normal brain function. In higher doses, some CNS depressants can be used as general anesthetics or preanesthetics.

CNS depressants can be divided into three groups, based on their chemistry and pharmacology:

- *Barbiturates*, such as mephobarbital (Mebaral) and sodium pentobarbital (Nembutal), are used as preanesthetics, promoting sleep.
- *Benzodiazepines*, such as diazepam (Valium), alprazolam (Xanax), and estazolam (ProSom), can be prescribed to treat anxiety, acute stress reactions, panic attacks, convulsions, and sleep disorders. For the latter, benzodiazepines are usually prescribed only for short-term relief of sleep problems because of the development

of tolerance and risk of addiction.

- *Newer sleep medications*, such as zolpidem (Ambien), zaleplon (Sonata), and eszopiclone (Lunesta), are now more commonly prescribed to treat sleep disorders. These medications are nonbenzodiazepines that act at a subset of the benzodiazepine receptors and appear to have a lower risk for abuse and addiction.

How Are CNS Depressants Abused?

CNS depressants are usually taken orally, sometimes in combination with other drugs or to counteract the effects of other licit or illicit drugs (e.g., stimulants).

What Are Stimulants?

Stimulants (amphetamines [Adderall, Dexedrine] and methylphenidate [Concerta, Ritalin]) increase alertness, attention, and energy. They also increase blood pressure and heart rate, constrict blood vessels, increase blood glucose, and open up the pathways of the respiratory system. Historically, stimulants were prescribed to treat asthma and other respiratory problems,

obesity, neurological disorders, and a variety of other ailments. As their potential for abuse and addiction became apparent, the prescribing of stimulants by physicians began to wane. Now, stimulants are prescribed for treating only a few health conditions, most notably ADHD, narcolepsy, and, in some instances, depression that has not responded to other treatments.

How Are Stimulants Abused?

Stimulants may be taken orally, but some abusers crush the tablets, dissolve them in water, and then inject the mixture; complications can arise from this because insoluble fillers in the tablets can block small blood vessels. Stimulants have been abused for both “performance enhancement” and recreational purposes (i.e., to get high).

What Is DXM?

DXM is the active ingredient found in OTC cough and cold medications. When taken in recommended doses, these medications are safe and effective.

How Is DXM Abused?

DXM is taken orally. In order to experience the mind-altering effects of

DXM, excessive amounts of liquid or gels must be consumed. The availability and accessibility of these products make them a serious concern, particularly for youth, who tend to be their primary abusers.

FACT:

In 2008, 15.2 million Americans age 12 and older had taken a prescription pain reliever, tranquilizer, stimulant, or sedative for nonmedical purposes at least once in the year prior to being surveyed.

What can you do to help a friend who is abusing prescription medication?

Be a real friend. You might even save a life. Encourage your friend to stop and seek professional help.

If you have questions or need help, call the Community Program at (516) 822-4060.