

Generation Rx - The Emergence of Teen Prescription Drug Abuse

FACT: Teenage use/abuse of opiate prescription medications is growing dramatically even as use of illicit drugs (cocaine, hallucinogens, inhalants etc.) are declining or leveling off.

- In the last ten years, the number of teens going into treatment for addiction to prescription pain relievers has increased by more than 300%. (SAMSHA, 2006)
- One-third of all new abusers of prescription drugs in 2005 were 12-17 year olds. (SAMSHA, 2006)
- Prescription drugs are the most commonly abused drugs among 12-13 year olds. (SAMSHA, 2006)
- Nearly 1 in 10 12th graders reporting using prescription type narcotic drugs such as Vicodin or OxyContin. (Monitoring The Future, the University of Michigan, 2006)
- Only 1 in 20 12th graders reported using either cocaine or hallucinogens. (Monitoring the Future, 2006)
- In 2005 2.1 million teens abused prescription drugs. (SAMSHA, 2006)

FACT: Teens abusing prescription drugs often believe their use is safe and responsible.

- When teens abuse prescription drugs, they often characterize their use of the drugs as “responsible”, “controlled” or “safe” with the perception that the drugs are safer than street drugs.
(Friedman, R. “The Changing Face of Teenage Drug Abuse: The Trend toward Prescription Drugs,” The New England Journal of Medicine, April 6, 2006, Number 14).
- What might explain the growing confidence in the safety of prescription drugs? Nowadays, it is nearly impossible to open a newspaper, turn on the television, or search the Internet without encountering an advertisement for a prescription medication. Expenditures by the pharmaceutical industry for direct-to-consumer advertising increased from \$1.8 billion in 1999 to \$4.2 billion in 2004. One effect has been to foster an image of prescription drugs as an integral and routine aspect of everyday life. Any adverse effects are relegated to the fine print of an advertisement or dispatched in a few seconds of rapid-fire speech. (Friedman, 2006)

FACT: Prescription drugs are relatively easy to get.

- Nearly half (47%) of teens who used prescription drugs say they get them for free or from a relative or friend. (SAMSHA, 2006)
- They can also get them all too easily from physicians, according to recent data from the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University. A 2004 survey of physicians found that 43 percent did not ask about prescription-drug abuse when taking a patient’s history and one third did not regularly call or obtain records from the patient’s previous physician before prescribing potentially addictive drugs. (Friedman, 2006)

- When Eric, an 18-year-old who lives in San Francisco, wants to get some Vicodin (hydrocodone–acetaminophen), it's a simple matter. "I can get prescription drugs from different places and don't ever have to see a doctor," he explained. "I have friends whose parents are pill addicts, and we 'borrow' from them. Other times I have friends who have ailments who get lots of pills and sell them for cheap. As long as prescription pills are taken right, they're much safer than street drugs." (Friedman, 2006)
- "Prescription drugs are a lot easier to get than street drugs," said John, a high-school sophomore in Austin, Texas. "Kids can get them on the street, from parents and friends, or on the Internet." (Friedman, 2006)
- Claire, an 18-year-old who lives in Maine, told me, "You can always find a doctor who you can convince that you have a sleeping problem to get Ambien [zolpidem] or that you have ADD [attention-deficit disorder] and get Adderall." (Friedman, 2006)

FACT: Adolescents are more likely than young adults to become dependent on prescription.

- More 12-17 year olds than young adults (18-25) became dependent on or abused prescription drugs in the last year. (SAMSHA, 2006)

Primary sources include:

SAMSHA, Treatment Episode Data Set and National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2006. SAMSHA is the Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration, an agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The Monitoring the Future survey, which is sponsored by the National Institute on Drug Abuse and designed and conducted by researchers at the University of Michigan. The study, which began in 1975, annually surveys a nationally representative sample of about 50,000 students in 400 public and private secondary schools in the United States.

Friedman, R. "The Changing Face of Teenage Drug Abuse: The Trend toward Prescription Drugs" ([The New England Journal of Medicine](#), April 6, 2006, Number 14)