

Myth Busters: 6 Myths about Teens and Prescription Drug Abuse

Myth #1: Prescription medications are safer to abuse than other illicit substances.

Truth: Many teens incorrectly believe that prescription drugs are the safer way to get high, cope with stress or perform better at school or on the field. After all, they've seen their moms, dads, grandparents and other family members take the very same medications to treat various illnesses. So, how bad can they be? Very.

When misused or taken without a doctor's prescription, these drugs can be just as harmful as illegal street drugs. Mixing different prescription drugs together or with alcohol or other substances—as many teens do—can have grave and possibly deadly consequences.

When talking to teens, you might say: Prescription drugs are very powerful medications. If you take these medications inappropriately or without a prescription, there is no telling how they may affect you. Abusing these drugs can stop your heart, your breathing or both. Bottom line: The abuse of prescription drugs is every bit as dangerous as abusing other substances.

Myth #2: Unlike underage drinking and marijuana use, using and sharing prescription medications is legal.

Truth: Using these drugs without a doctor's prescription or abusing someone else's prescriptions—or your own—is always harmful, not to mention illegal.

When talking to teens, you might ask and say: Has anyone asked you for prescription drugs? Did you know that selling or giving prescription drugs to a friend is illegal? Not only can these medications make healthy kids very sick, you could also end up in jail. It's against the law for you or your friends to possess certain prescription drugs like strong pain medications without a prescription. Only a doctor or pharmacist can legally give you these medications.

Myth #3: Everyone is doing it.

Truth: While one in five teens admits to using prescription drugs recreationally to get high or help manage their lives, the vast majority (80 percent) are not abusing these drugs. Try not to normalize teen prescription drug abuse. It's important to avoid language that suggests a majority of teens are abusing prescription drugs and to correct your teen if they think that "everybody's doing it."

Myth #4: Teens often get prescription medications from drug dealers on the street.

Truth: Unfortunately, it's very easy for teens to get their hands on prescription drugs. In fact, prescription drug abuse often starts at the nearest medicine cabinet. The majority of teens (7 out of 10) get prescription drugs from friends or relatives by stealing, buying or simply asking for them, according to the Partnership for a Drug-Free America. Some teens also get these drugs from strangers, including drug dealers or by purchasing them online at illegal Internet pharmacies.

Myth #5: It won't happen to my teen.

Truth: This is very dangerous thinking. The reality is that every teenager—even the most accomplished—is vulnerable.

The teen years are full of uncertainties. Teens are on a road to self discovery, constantly comparing themselves to their peers and pushing the limits of their independence. They want to fit in and be well liked, while also balancing other goals, like getting into a good college. Since the teen brain is not yet fully developed, their judgment and ability to make sound decisions is not as good as they (or you) might think.

Taken together, it's no wonder teens are prone to a variety of risk-taking behaviors. Understanding what might motivate them to abuse prescription drugs can help parents, teachers, coaches and others ask the right questions and intervene. The good news is that kids who continue to learn about the risks of drugs at home are up to 50 percent less likely to use drugs than those who are not taught about these dangers.

Myth #6: Misusing prescription drugs is fine “every once and a while,” and doing so can help me better manage my life and feel better.

Teens may perceive prescription drugs to be safer than illicit drugs largely because doctors prescribe them and messages about their use are widely available—in popular media like movies or television and magazine advertisements. But these drugs are just as dangerous as street drugs and, because most addictions start during adolescence, experimenting with prescription medications or any other drug can be a very slippery slope.

Prescription drugs may affect brain function. For a person who needs a medication for a legitimate medical reason, this change may correct a deficit or imbalance. For an otherwise healthy brain, the changes caused by chronic abuse of these drugs can be damaging, addicting or even life-threatening.

Parents, teachers, coaches and healthcare providers should try to empathize with the pressures teens face and offer tips and strategies for dealing with stress in a healthy way. For example, exercising, eating well or seeking counseling to help manage anxiety. It's also important to help bolster their self-esteem by encouraging them to focus on things they are good at or enjoy, like playing sports, joining clubs, or volunteering in the community.

When talking to teens, you might say: When prescription drugs are abused, they can be as addictive and dangerous as street drugs. You can die from abusing prescription drugs . . . even the first time.