



# Getting High on prescription drugs and over-the-counter cough medicine is Dangerous



THE PARTNERSHIP<sup>®</sup>  
AT DRUGFREE.ORG

# GETTING HIGH ON PRESCRIPTION DRUGS AND OVER-THE-COUNTER COUGH MEDICINE IS DANGEROUS

Prescription (Rx) drugs and over-the-counter (OTC) cough medicine are the new “in” drugs for many teenagers. But many parents, who may be well-versed on the dangers of street drug use, are not aware that medicine abuse is a growing problem among American teens and that when abused, Rx drugs and OTC cough medicine can be just as dangerous as street drugs. Nearly 1 in 6 teens has used a prescription medicine for nonmedical reasons. And 1 in 8 teens has reported getting high on cough medicine.

Many parents are not aware that their own medicine cabinets are potential sources for teenage abuse. Rx drugs and OTC cough medicines are important and beneficial medicines that are safe and effective if used as medically intended. When we talk about abuse of medicines, we don't mean kids mistakenly taking the wrong dose or taking a stronger-than-necessary medicine for an ailment. Abuse is teens misusing prescription and OTC cough medicine intentionally to get high.

Teens who abuse Rx medicine can experience dramatic increases in blood pressure and heart rate, organ damage, difficulty breathing, seizures, addiction and possibly even death.

## ALARMING STATS:

A survey of teen drug use conducted by The Partnership at Drugfree.org found that:

- 1 in 6 teens has abused a pain reliever such as OxyContin or Vicodin
- 1 in 10 teens has abused the stimulants Ritalin or Adderall for nonmedical purposes
- 1 in 8 teens has reported getting high on over-the-counter cough medicine.

## LET'S TAKE A CLOSER LOOK

Why is teen abuse of Rx drugs and OTC cough medicine happening now?

Used as prescribed or directed, medicines improve our lives. When misused and abused, the opposite is true, and the consequences of this behavior are devastating, particularly among teens.

Our society has become very familiar — and comfortable — with the common use of prescription drugs and over-the-counter cough medicines. As new medicines for alleviating symptoms come to market, they are heavily promoted with their images advertised in newspapers, magazines, on television and the internet, raising our understanding of the conditions they treat. As a result, teens have grown up associating medicine with solving problems and have a heightened awareness of Rx drugs and OTC cough medicine.

Teens also have easy access to medicine. Two-thirds (65 percent) of teens who report abuse of prescription medicine are getting it from friends, family and acquaintances.

## CAUGHT IN THE WEB



Teens can find useful information on the internet about the risks of the nonmedical, recreational use of prescription drugs and over-the-counter cough medicine. But

they can also learn how to abuse them and divert medicines to achieve a desired high. Many websites describe what kinds of prescription drugs or over-the-counter cough medicine would-be abusers can buy and how much to take to intoxicate themselves.

Most disturbingly, it is as easy for a teenager to buy narcotic pain relievers, stimulants or sedatives over the Internet as it is to buy clothes or video games.

Enter “no prescription pain meds” in your web browser’s search bar, and you’ll find numerous websites ready to sell your son or daughter prescription medicine — without the nuisance of an actual prescription or even asking your child’s age — and deliver it to your home in an unmarked package.

What most parents don’t know is that the most common source of Rx drugs and OTC cough medicine for teens is your own medicine cabinet or the medicine cabinets in the homes of your child’s friends. New and expired or forgotten prescriptions or last winter’s OTC cough medicine can be inviting targets for a teenager looking to get high.

### WHAT TO DO?

Start by taking an inventory of the medicines in your home, and be sure to safeguard them. Some parents may need to consider their own drug behavior and attitudes. If you’re casual about using Rx drugs or OTC cough medicine, even if you’re not looking to get high, you may be setting a bad example for your child. Medicine should be used by the person for whom it’s intended, to treat the conditions for which it’s intended. Don’t use your child’s medicine for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) to try to give you the energy and focus to complete a difficult work assignment. Regard medicine seriously, and it’s more likely that your child will, too. Develop and emphasize healthy coping skills and work habits for your family.

It’s up to you to educate yourself about the real dangers of prescription drugs and OTC cough medicine abuse and to discuss these risks with your teen. Kids need to hear from parents that getting high on prescription drugs and OTC cough medicine can be just as harmful as getting high on illegal street drugs — and that it is illegal to possess prescription medicine without a prescription. Research shows that kids who learn a lot about drug risks from their parents are up to half as likely to use drugs as kids who haven’t had that conversation with Mom and Dad.

Unfortunately, research also shows that fewer parents today are talking to their teenagers about prescription medicine abuse than they were only a few years ago. It’s time to turn that around. This guide can help. So can the information found on the website of The Partnership at Drugfree.org — [drugfree.org](http://drugfree.org) — and the other resources listed at the end of this guide. Quite simply, if you educate your children about the health risks they may encounter, they will be better protected in today’s changing world.

## EDUCATE YOURSELF



If you’re going to discuss prescription drug and OTC cough medicine abuse with your kids, you need to know what you’re talking about. You should be able to distinguish between the types and effects of medicine some teens are abusing to get high. Some of these are described below.

### PRESCRIPTION (RX) MEDICINE

Beneficial when used according to a doctor’s instructions, these medicines should be taken only by the person for whom a doctor has prescribed them. Using prescription medicine prescribed for others or without doctor’s orders is unsafe and illegal.

#### PAIN MEDICINE

Teenagers abuse narcotic pain relievers more than any other prescription medicine. Emergency Room visits related to this very powerful medicine have nearly tripled over the last decade.

- Vicodin (hydrocodone)
- OxyContin (oxycodone)
- Percocet (oxycodone and acetaminophen)
- Darvon (propoxyphene)
- Codeine
- Opana

**May be medically useful for:**

— Treating moderate-to-severe pain, such as after surgery or dental procedures. Be aware, dentists are the main prescriber of prescription pain relievers for youth aged 10-19 years old. If your child is prescribed pain relievers, vigilantly monitor appropriate use and disposal of unused medicine.

**Abused by teens to:**

— Feel pleasure or sensations of well-being.

**Dangerous because:**

— They are highly addictive. Over time, tolerance develops to certain effects of these medicines, resulting in the need to take more and more to get the same pleasant feelings. Addicted teens who suddenly stop using may go through withdrawal, a horrible physical experience of intense restlessness, muscle and bone pain, insomnia, diarrhea, vomiting and cold flashes.

— Taken in overdose, breathing slows down and eventually stops and death may occur. Time-released products, designed to deliver pain-relieving medicine into the system slowly over hours, may be crushed and snorted, causing the medicine to enter the system all at once, sometimes resulting in death.

— Taken in combination with other prescription drugs or OTC cough medicine or alcohol, the risk of life-threatening respiratory depression is increased.

**STIMULANTS**

Stimulants increase the amounts of circulating brain chemicals that raise blood pressure and heart rate, speed up breathing, decrease appetite and deprive the user of sleep. Research shows that using stimulant medicine non-medically is related to lower GPAs — and use of other substances.

- Ritalin
- Concerta (methylphenidate)
- Adderall (mixed amphetamine salts)
- Focalin (dexmethylphenidate)
- Dexedrine (dextroamphetamine)

**May be medically useful for:**

— Treating attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and narcolepsy and for short-term treatment of obesity.

**Abused by teens to:**

— Feel especially alert, focused and full of energy. May be taken in hopes of managing stressful schoolwork or to “pull an all-nighter.”

— Suppress appetite in order to lose weight.

**Dangerous because:**

— They can be addictive.

— High doses taken over a short time can lead to feelings of hostility, intense fear and paranoia.

— High doses may result in dangerously high body temperature and irregular heartbeat, with possible cardiovascular failure or seizures.

— Use in combination with OTC decongestants can result in dangerously high blood pressure or irregular heart rhythms.

— They can cause insomnia, digestive problems and erratic weight change.

**SEDATIVES, SEDATIVE-HYPNOTICS AND TRANQUILIZERS**

Sedatives, sedative-hypnotics, and tranquilizers affect brain systems to produce a drowsy or calming effect, sometimes to the point of inducing sleep.

**Benzodiazepines:**

- Benzodiazepines:
- Valium (diazepam)
- Xanax (alprazolam)
- Ativan (lorazepam)
- Klonopin (clonazepam)
- Restoril (temazepam)

**Non-Benzodiazepine Sedatives**

- Ambien (zolpidem)
- Lunesta (eszopiclone)

**Barbiturates**

- Mebaral (mephobarbital)
- Nembutal (pentobarbital)

**May be medically useful for:**

— Treating anxiety, severe stress, panic attacks and insomnia in the short term, as well as some types of seizure disorders and muscle spasms.

**Abused by teens to:**

— Feel calm and sleepy with less tension, anxiety or panic.

**Dangerous because:**

— They can be addictive; when use is reduced or stopped, seizures and other withdrawal symptoms may follow.

— They can be deadly in combination with prescription pain medicine, some OTC cold and allergy medicine, or alcohol.

## OTC COUGH MEDICINE ABUSE

### OVER-THE-COUNTER COUGH MEDICINE

OTC cough medicine is available at any pharmacy without a prescription. Like prescription medicine, it can be safe when used according to packaged instructions or when recommended by a doctor familiar with your medical history and other medications you may be taking.

#### Cough Medicines

Teens can get high by taking cough medicine in excessive amounts. What makes them high is the cough suppressant ingredient called dextromethorphan, or DXM for short, found in more than 100 OTC cough medicines. In syrups, tablets, capsules, lozenges, and gelatin capsules, some teens combine DXM with other substances, such as antihistamines, expectorants, decongestants and/or simple pain relievers.

- Coricidin cough and cold tablets
  - Alka-Seltzer Plus cold and cough medicine
  - TheraFlu cough products
  - select Robitussin cough products
  - Tylenol cold and cough products
- ... and many others, including store brands. To know if a product contains DXM, look on the label for “dextromethorphan” in the list of active ingredients.

**May be medically useful for:**

— Treating coughs and colds safely and effectively, when used according to directions.

**Abused by teens to:**

— Experience DXM’s effects, which, when abused, can range from euphoria to feelings of enhanced awareness to distortions of color and sound to visual hallucinations to “out-of-body” sensations, when users lose contact with their senses.

**Dangerous because:**

— DXM’s negative physical effects from overdose include rapid heartbeat, high blood pressure, diarrhea, seizures, panic, drowsiness, confusion, dizziness, blurred vision, impaired physical coordination and coma.

— Side effects may be worse when DXM is used with other medicine or with alcohol or street drugs.

— Overdoses of other ingredients found in DXM-containing medicines have their own serious side effects, including:

- Acetaminophen (pain reliever) = liver damage.
- Chlorpheniramine (antihistamine) = increased heart rate, lack of coordination, seizures and coma.
- Guaifenesin (expectorant) = vomiting.
- Pseudoephedrine (decongestant) = irregular heartbeat, headaches, difficulty breathing, anxiety and seizures.

## MORE MEDICINE ABUSE, MORE DANGER

Prescription drugs and OTC cough medicines have side effects that range from the unpleasant to the dangerous for the teen abusing them. But the effects — and the dangers — are intensified when these medicines are combined with each other, with alcohol or with street drugs. Even when used at the recommended doses to treat medical conditions, the interaction effect of combining multiple medicines can be dangerous.

## USE AN EXPERT

Further educate yourself about teen abuse of prescription drugs and OTC cough medicine by talking directly to an expert about your family's health needs and concerns. If you find pills or drug paraphernalia (like spoons or cut up pens) in your child's room, but you're not certain what they are, show them to your child's physician or pharmacist, who can best identify suspicious substances for you. And if you need information quickly about the kinds of drugs teens may be abusing, how to talk to your child who you suspect may be abusing drugs, or what to do if you know your child is definitely using drugs, visit [www.drugfree.org](http://www.drugfree.org) or call our toll-free helpline at 1-855-DRUGFREE.

## Warning Signs

Clues that your child may be abusing prescription drugs or OTC cough medicine to get high:

- Cough or cold, prescription, or unidentifiable medicine among personal belongings with no evidence of illness.
- Unexplained disappearance of medicines from medicine cabinet.
- Declining grades, loss of interest in hobbies and usual activities.
- Changes in friends, physical appearance, hygiene and general behavior.
- Disrupted eating or sleeping patterns and energy level.
- Your computer's browsing history shows visits to pro-drug websites devoted to how to get and abuse prescription drugs and/or OTC cough medicine.

## COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR KIDS

As a parent, you are in the best position possible to help steer your child away from intentionally abusing prescription and OTC cough medicine. Some tips:

### Set an Example



Your actions and attitudes impact your kids' behavior. Don't abuse prescription drugs and OTC cough medicines yourself. Use medicine as the doctor prescribed for you or the label intends. Don't alter the dose without talking to your doctor, and be sure your doctor knows about all the medicines you

are taking. Don't medicate today's headache or the sore muscles from yesterday's workout with the prescription pain medicine your doctor gave you after last year's surgery. A casual attitude may reinforce the false assumption that because they were made by a pharmaceutical company, these medicines are a safe solution for any condition or problem. If you have a physical complaint, talk to your doctor. But don't use another person's prescription medicine. Ever.

Use OTC cough medicines according to packaged instructions or your doctor's recommendations. Taking far more cough medicine than the label instructs will not make your cough go away any faster. It can, however, have serious side effects and indicate to your teenager that it is alright to take more medicine than necessary. That's dangerous.

### Stop the Myth

Getting high with prescription drugs and OTC cough medicine is NOT safer than getting high with illegal street drugs. Prescription painkillers, stimulants, sedatives, tranquilizers and OTC cough medicines are dangerous when used in excess and repeatedly to get high.

## Connect with Your Kids



Get and stay closely involved with your kids' lives as they go through middle school and into high school. You won't connect well with your kids about serious health issues if you haven't expressed interest in the day-to-day events of interest to them. Take time to understand their stressors, and encourage different

coping skills to deal with emotions and stress. Use part of your daily conversations to talk honestly about prescription drug and OTC cough medicine abuse. Know the facts, clear up wrong information, but don't make it all a lecture: Listen to your children's questions and comments about their drug topics of concern. For more ways to prevent your child from using drugs and alcohol visit [www.theparenttoolkit.org](http://www.theparenttoolkit.org).

## Help Your Child Make Good Decisions

You DO have the power to influence your child's decision about whether or not to abuse prescription and OTC medicine. Research says that fear of upsetting parents is the number one reason why kids do not use drugs. Your child is more likely to be offered drugs by a friend than a stranger, and exposure to drugs can begin as early as age 12. He or she may be better equipped to avoid peer pressure to get high if there is a solid, explicit family policy against drug abuse to fall back on. Give your child the ammunition to make clear to his or her acquaintances that the consequences of abusing prescription drugs, OTC cough medicine and other drugs are too severe to risk. Set clear and consistent rules for behavior, and help your child come up with firm but friendly responses to use with friends who might urge drug abuse. Remind your child that a real friend won't care if he or she does not abuse medicine.

For ideas on how to start talking with your teen about drugs and alcohol, scripts on what to say and tips for answering tough questions, please see our [Parent Talk Kit](#).

## Let Your Child Know If There is a Family History of Drug or Alcohol Problems

If there is a history of drug or alcohol dependence or addiction in your family, especially when it is the parent's history, you should let your child know because he or she is at a higher risk for developing a drug or alcohol problem. These conversations should take place when you feel your child is able to understand the information, no later than the pre-teen or early teen years. There's no reason to be embarrassed or shy about discussing your own addiction problems with your kids. Discuss it in the same way you would if you had a disease like diabetes.

## Monitor Your Child

Research shows that when parents monitor, supervise and set boundaries, their teens are at a lowered risk for using drugs and alcohol. To monitor your child:

- Know where your child is at all times.
- Be aware of your teen's activities, especially during the after-school period, which is a high-risk period for teen drug use.
- Know whom your child is hanging out with.
- Keep track of your child's academic performance. Studies have shown that problems in school are a possible marker for alcohol and drug problems and that school involvement and academic achievement can protect against drug and alcohol use.
- Safeguard and monitor any medicine that your teen has been prescribed, and ensure proper use. Be sure to properly dispose of any unused medicine.

## SAFEGUARD YOUR MEDICINES



A main source for teenagers of prescription drugs and OTC cough medicine is the family medicine cabinet. Think about it: Pharmaceuticals are much easier to get — just a walk down the hall or a peek into a friend's medicine cabinet — than illegal street drugs. Prescription and OTC cough medicine are ben-

official and necessary, but if you are not in need of them right now, secure them out of reach of younger children and teens to avoid accidental use or intentional abuse. Learn how to safeguard your medicine.

### TAKE A MEDICINE INVENTORY

- Do an inventory of the contents of your medicine cabinets, kitchen cabinets, bureau tops or anywhere in the house where you may store medicines.
- If necessary, monitor the pill quantities and medicine levels in your prescription drug and OTC cough medicine containers.
- Put medicine away. If you're currently taking medicine, lock it up in a place where you can get to it easily but where your child is unlikely to look.



If medicine in your house is left over from a previous condition or ailment, get rid of it. Attend a drug take-back day or drop off unused medicine at a [permanent prescription medicine collection site](#).

- Because it is bad for our environment (the ground, water and air) to flush medicine down the toilet, try mixing unwanted prescription medicine with used coffee grounds or kitty litter. This makes pills less appealing and less recognizable to anyone who can see your trash.
- Urge your friends and relatives — especially the parents of your children's friends — to perform medicine inventories of their own.
- Learn more about how to safeguard and dispose of unused medicine.



### ACT NOW!

If you suspect you have a kid in trouble, act now!

Teenage drug abuse is tied to two basic urges:

1. The desire to experiment in order to feel good and wanting to fit in.

2. The intention to self-medicate to help deal with the various sources of stress — schoolwork, relationships or conflicts with friends or family members. Recent research estimates that as many as half of teens who abuse drugs also have a mental health disorder that needs treating.

### Intervention

If your child has a drug abuse problem, consider an intervention. It doesn't have to be a formal confrontation; a simple but direct discussion will do. Here are some tips to start — and keep — the conversation going:

- Have your discussion when your child is not high and when you and your child are calm and rational.
- Express your love and desire for your child's safety and well-being as the basis for your concern.
- Be as neutral and nonjudgmental as you can.
- Tell your child the behavioral signs you've observed that made you concerned. Avoid direct accusations, but be open about your suspicions.
- Listen, listen, listen! Consider everything your child has to say. If he or she brings up a related problem, explain that you will address that issue next, but that what you need to talk about right now is his or her drug abuse.
- If you need help getting this conversation started, involve another family member, your child's guidance counselor or a physician.
- If you want to talk to someone about your child's drug use and drinking, call our Parents Toll-Free Helpline at 1-855-DRUGFREE (1-855-378-4373).
- Check out the website of The Partnership at Drug-free.org for more suggestions on raising the topic of drug abuse with your teen.



## GET HELP

The important first step with any health issue is to get a professional evaluation of your child's condition. If you think your child needs professional help, your doctor, hospital, or school nurse may be able to help. You can also call Parents Toll-Free Helpline 1-855-DRUGFREE (1-855-378-4373) to speak to a parent specialist or visit [www.drugfree.org/timetogethelp](http://www.drugfree.org/timetogethelp).

For more information, visit [www.drugfree.org](http://www.drugfree.org).

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## MORE RESOURCES FOR HELP

### [The Partnership at Drugfree.org](http://www.drugfree.org)

[www.drugfree.org](http://www.drugfree.org)

For parents, caretakers and other community stakeholders, helping them prevent, intervene in or find treatment for drug and alcohol use by their children. Find a wealth of information, tools and opportunities to connect with others who may have a child struggling with addiction.

### [Parents Toll-Free Helpline](http://timetogethelp.drugfree.org/parents-toll-free-helpline-0)

[timetogethelp.drugfree.org/parents-toll-free-helpline-0](http://timetogethelp.drugfree.org/parents-toll-free-helpline-0)

1-855-DRUGFREE (1-855-378-4373)

The Partnership at Drugfree.org Parents Helpline is free, nationwide support in English and Spanish for parents and other primary caregivers of children who want to talk to someone about their child's drug use and drinking.

### [The Medicine Abuse Project](http://www.drugfree.org)

[MedicineAbuseProject.org](http://www.drugfree.org)

A multi-year effort from The Partnership at Drug-free.org to raise awareness and encourage parents and the public-at-large to help curb the abuse of medicine by teens and young adults.

### [National Institute on Drug Abuse \(NIDA\)](http://www.drugabuse.gov)

[www.drugabuse.gov](http://www.drugabuse.gov)

Part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and one of the National Institutes of Health: Primary source of scientific studies and new discoveries on the effects of drugs of abuse and how best to prevent drug abuse and treat drug addiction.

### [National Institute of Mental Health \(NIMH\)](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)

[www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)

Part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and one of the National Institutes of Health: Primary source of scientific research on mental and behavioral disorders.

### [SAMHSA's National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information \(NCADI\)](http://ncadi.samhsa.gov)

<http://ncadi.samhsa.gov>

1-877-SAMHSA7

Part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: A resource for accessing publications on alcohol and drug use prevention and addiction treatment.

### [Stop Medicine Abuse](http://www.stopmedicineabuse.org)

[StopMedicineAbuse.org](http://www.stopmedicineabuse.org)

Created by the leading makers of OTC cough medicines and their trade association, the Consumer Healthcare Products Association (CHPA): Cough medicine abuse educational materials, testimonials, resources for Spanish speakers and tools for school nurses and parents to work together.

### [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\)](http://www.samhsa.gov)

[www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)

Part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Provides information, statistics and articles on improving the quality and availability of drug and alcohol addiction treatment.