

Youth Prescription Drug Abuse: Key Findings

Overview of the Problem

During the past fifty years the use of prescription drugs to treat medical disorders has risen substantially in the United States. From 1960 to 2002 the amount spent on prescription drugs has risen from \$2.7 billion to \$162 billion. A series of reports, surveys, and studies, have suggested that the non-medical use of prescription drugs is increasing at a substantial rate. Youth, including adolescents (12-17 year-olds) and young adults (18-24 years old) represent the fastest growing segment of the population abusing prescription drugs.

The three classes of prescription drugs commonly abused among youth are:

- **Opiates** (e.g., Vicodin & OxyContin)
- **Stimulants** (e.g., Ritalin & Adderall)
- **Central Nervous Stimulant Depressants**, which includes sedatives or tranquilizers (e.g., Valium & Xanax)

The growing abuse of prescription drugs among youth has been well documented in multiple data sources, including the National Survey for Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), the Monitoring the Future (MTF) Study, the Partnership for Drug Free America (Attitude Tracking Survey), and the California Student Survey (CSS).

Prevalence of Prescription Drug Abuse among Youth

National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) Data

- The following trends of prescription drug use are from the NSDUH between 2005 and 2006:
 - Today's teens are more likely to have abused prescription drugs than most illicit drugs.
 - For the first time, prescription drugs are the most abused category of drugs following marijuana.
 - **One third of new abusers** of prescription drugs were **between the ages of 12-17** years old.
 - Nearly **1 in 5 teens** (19% or 4.5 million) report using a prescription medication that was not prescribed to them.
 - **14.5%** of 18-25 year olds and **9.1%** of 12-17 year old reported misusing psychotherapeutics whereas only 4.4% of those 26 and older misused these substances.
 - **Teen girls** (12-17-year-olds) **are more likely than teen boys to have abused** prescription drugs (9.9% of girls vs. 8.2% of boys), pain relievers (8.1% vs. 7.0%), tranquilizers (2.6% vs. 1.9%), and stimulants (2.6% vs. 1.9%) in the past year.
- California-specific data from the 2002-2004 NSDUH mirrors national trends.
 - The prevalence of prescription drug abuse among youth in California is slightly higher than those in the national sample.
 - In general, young adults ages 18-25 have the highest rates of use as compared to other age groups.

The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) 2004, Past Year Non-Medical Use of Prescription Drugs (%)

	12-17 Year Olds		18-25 Year Olds	
	CA	US	CA	US
Overall Psychotherapeutics	9.1	8.8	12.5	14.8
Pain Relievers	7.8	7.4	9.9	11.9
Tranquilizers	2.1	2.1	3.1	5.2
Stimulants	1.9	2.0	3.4	3.7
Sedatives	0.5	0.5	0.3	1.6

Monitoring the Future (MTF) Data

- The following trends of prescription drug use are from the MTF Study between 2002 and 2006:
 - The non-medical use of narcotic drugs is the second most prevalent drug used among high school seniors.
 - Nearly **1 in 10 twelfth graders** reported **using Vicodin** (an opiate/pain medication) without a doctor's order during the past year.
 - Vicodin and OxyContin (both opiates/pain medications) are the two drugs that accounted for the recent increases in the use of prescription pain pills.

Annual Prevalence of Use of Various Prescription Drugs, 2002-2006 (%)

Primary Drug	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Vicodin					
8 th Grade	2.5	2.8	2.5	2.6	3.0
10 th Grade	6.9	7.2	6.2	5.9	7.0
12 th Grade	9.6	10.5	9.3	9.3	9.7
College Students	6.9	7.5	7.4	9.6	7.6
Young Adults	8.2	8.6	8.9	9.3	9.1
OxyContin					
8 th Grade	1.3	1.7	1.7	1.8	2.6
10 th Grade	3.0	3.6	3.5	3.2	3.8
12 th Grade	4.0	4.5	5.0	5.5	4.3
College Students	1.5	2.2	2.5	2.1	3.0
Young Adults	1.9	2.6	3.1	3.1	3.1
Tranquilizers					
8 th Grade	2.6	2.7	2.5	2.8	2.6
10 th Grade	6.3	5.3	5.1	4.8	5.2
12 th Grade	7.7	6.7	7.3	6.8	6.6
College Students	6.7	6.9	6.7	6.4	5.8
Young Adults	7.0	6.8	7.4	6.7	6.5

California Student Survey Data

- The 2005-2006 California Student Survey found that **15% of 11th graders used prescription pain killers during the past year, second only to the use of marijuana**. In addition, 9% of 9th graders and 4% of 7th graders used prescription pain pills without a prescription

Partnership for a Drug-Free America Survey

Of concern are youth attitudes toward and misperceptions regarding the misuse of prescription drugs. According to the Partnership Attitude Tracking Study (PATs) conducted by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America,

- **Four out of ten** teens report that the use of **prescription drugs are safer** than using illegal drugs
- **One-third** of youth reported there is “**nothing wrong**” with using **prescription drugs** without a prescription once in a while.
- Twenty-nine percent or **6.8 million teens** are **under the impression that prescription pain relievers are not addictive**, 32% believe they have fewer side effects than street drugs, and 25% think prescription pain relievers can be used as study aids.

Access

- During the past fifty years the use of prescription drugs to treat medical disorders has risen substantially in the United States. From 1960 to 2002 the **amount spent on prescription drugs has risen from \$2.7 billion to \$162 billion.**
- Several reports revealed **teens are most likely to obtain prescription drugs from their parents’ medicine cabinet and from other people they know.** Despite the dramatic proliferation of Internet sites selling prescription medications, the 2005 Partnership Attitude Tracking Survey (PATs) report revealed that teens are more likely to obtain prescription drugs from their parents’ medicine cabinet (62%) and other people’s prescriptions (50%) than by purchasing them over the Internet (32%).

Research Studies

- When teens abuse prescription drugs, they often characterize their use as “responsible” or “controlled” (Friedman, 2006).
- Teens admit to abusing prescription medicine for reasons other than getting high, including to relieve pain or anxiety, to sleep better, just to experiment, to help with concentration or to increase alertness. (Boyd, McCabe, Cranford & Young, 2006).

Dependence & Treatment

- Prescription drug abuse dramatically increased during the past decade. In the last 10 years, the **number of teens going into treatment for addiction to prescription pain relievers has increased by more than 300 percent.** (Treatment Episode Data - TEDS, 2006).
- Between 2004 and 2005, the proportion of those seeking treatment for prescription pain medication increased nine percent, to more than 64,000 admissions. (TEDS, 2006).
- Abusing prescription drugs for the first time before age 16 leads to a greater risk of dependence later in life. (NSDUH, 2006).

Citations

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