



DrugFree@WorkPlace

This information is adapted from publications made available by the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Rx Drug Abuse by Young Workers

National data indicate that approximately 2.5 million young people in the United States have misused or abused prescription drugs in their lifetime.¹

One in five high school students reports having taken at least one prescription drug in his or her lifetime without a doctor's prescription.²

After marijuana, the prevalence of non-medical prescription drug use now exceeds the prevalence of all other illicit drug use among young Americans.³

Because these prescription drugs have legitimate medical uses and are legal when used correctly, younger employees may not fully understand the risks associated with their nonmedical use. However, prescription drug abuse carries risks ranging from slowed brain activity and irregular heartbeats to dangerously high body temperature, heart failure, or lethal seizures.

More than 1 million emergency department (ED) visits annually involve nonmedical use of pharmaceuticals or dietary supplements. Prescription pain relievers are present in half of nonmedical-use ED visits, and drugs often used to treat anxiety or sleep disorders are present in over a third.

National data suggest that unintentional overdose deaths involving opioid pain relievers have more than quadrupled over the past decade. More young people now die from overdoses of prescription pain relievers than of heroin and cocaine.

The types of prescription drugs misused by young workers span a broad range of medications, including oxycodone pain relievers (e.g., Percocet[®], Percodan[®], Tylox[®], OxyContin[®]); hydrocodone pain relievers (e.g., Vicodin[®], Lortab[®], Lorcet[®]/Lorcet Plus[®]); stimulants such as

methylphenidate (e.g., Ritalin[®], Concerta[®]), amphetaminedextroamphetamine (e.g., Adderall[®]), dexamethylphenidate (e.g., Focalin[®]), and dextroamphetamine (e.g., Dexedrine[®]); and sedatives such as Zolpidem (e.g., Ambien[®], Edluar[®], Zolpimist[®]).

Among young employees, the annual prevalence of nonmedical use of OxyContin[®] and Vicodin[®] is 4.9% and 8.1%, respectively, making these among the most frequently abused drugs by youths.

Health Risks of Rx Drug Abuse

In addition to the many short-term health risks, initiating prescription drug and other substance use at a young age carries long-term risks. Beginning drug use as a teen is associated with increased likelihood of developing abuse or dependence problems later, and also with increased likelihood of polysubstance abuse.⁴

Almost half of young workers who misuse prescription drugs also report using at least two other drugs, most often marijuana and alcohol.⁵ The risk of overdose is increased when prescription medications are used in combination with alcohol or other drugs. More than three-fourths (77%) of youth ED visits involving narcotics include multiple drugs.

Why Young Employees Use Rx Drugs

Younger workers may perceive that because prescription drugs have legal and legitimate medical uses, they are a safer alternative to other types of drugs. Young people may also believe that their parents would be less concerned about the use of prescription drugs than of illicit or street drugs.

When asked why they misuse prescription drugs, young workers' reasons vary by drug classification. For pain reliever or tranquilizer misuse, self-medication is the most common motivation. For example, youths report tranquilizer misuse in an effort to treat insomnia, and as many as half of all youths who misuse prescription opioids may be seeking relief for physical pain.

A smaller proportion of youths report recreational reasons for using pain relievers or tranquilizers, such as experimental use or to get high. In contrast, youths with non-medical stimulant use tend to report recreational motives about as often as self-medicating motives, including desire for increased concentration and alertness, to study or stay awake in order to work or “party,” or to get high.⁶ Finally, poisoning, often with a mix of prescription drugs, is one of the top three most common youth suicidal acts.⁷

Recognizing the Signs of Prescription Drug Abuse at Work

Coworkers and managers can recognize the warning signs of a young employee’s prescription drug abuse, including the following:

- Frequent tardiness or unexplained absences
- Inconsistent on-the-job performance
- Frequent small accidents resulting in minor injuries or damaged equipment
- Changes in a young worker’s physical health or personality, including:
 - ◇ Fatigue or excessive sleeping, red or glazed eyes, or repeated health complaints
 - ◇ Sudden mood changes, such as irritability, negative attitude, or personality changes
 - ◇ General loss of interest in work, sports activities, or social activities
 - ◇ Decreased interest—or obsessive interest—in work
 - ◇ Secretiveness or withdrawal from coworkers
 - ◇ Changes in friends

Employees should notify a worker’s supervisor and/or the HR Department if they observe these signs in a coworker.

¹Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Results from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Detailed tables. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

²Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC survey finds that 1 in 5 U.S. high school students has abused prescription drugs [Press release]. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/media/pressrel/2010/r100603.htm>.

³White House Office of National Drug Control Policy. Teens and prescription drugs: An analysis of recent trends on the emerging drug threat. Rockville, MD: Executive Office of the President.

⁴Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2013). Results from the 2012 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Detailed tables. Table 1.2A—Types of illicit drug use in lifetime, past year, and past month: Numbers in thousands. Rockville, MD: Author.

⁵National Institute on Drug Abuse. Prescription drugs: Abuse and addiction (NIH Publication No. 11-4881). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from <http://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/research-reports/prescription-drugs>.

⁶Boyd, C. J., McCabe, S. E., Cranford, J. A., & Young, A. (2006). Adolescents’ motivations to abuse prescription medications. *Pediatrics*, 118(6), 2472–2480.

⁷Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Suicide prevention: Youth suicide. Retrieved from http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pub/youth_suicide.html.