

# Partnership for a Drug-Free America

## Prescription Drug Abuse Update

November, 2009

You may think you've talked your kids' ears off about drugs, but Partnership research shows that only 24% of teens say their parents have told them about the dangers of Rx misuse and abuse. Teen prescription pill abuse is on the rise, and 1 in 5 teenagers has used an Rx drug recreationally to get high. Find out why – and what you can do to keep your own kids healthy.

### Rx DRUGS BY THE NUMBERS

**61%** of teens report prescription drugs are easier to get than illegal drugs

**41%** of teens mistakenly believe that abuse of medicines is less dangerous than abuse of illegal street drugs

**20%** of teens have abused a prescription drug in their lifetime

**10%** of teens have abused a prescription painkiller, such as Codeine, OxyContin, Percocet or Vicodin, in the past year

**5%** of treatment admissions of people 12 and older are for prescription painkillers – a 500% increase from 10 years ago

### WHAT PARENTS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT TEENS AND Rx DRUGS

#### Do different groups of teens abuse different types of medications?

Yes. Research shows that for any prescription-type drug, pain relievers, tranquilizers, and stimulants, older teens/young adults aged 18 to 25 were more likely than younger teens aged 12 to 17 to report nonmedical use in the past year. Among youths aged 12 to 17, girls were somewhat more likely than boys to have misused any prescription psychotherapeutic drug (9.9 vs. 8.2 percent), pain relievers (8.1 vs. 7.0 percent), tranquilizers (2.6 vs. 1.9 percent), and stimulants (2.6 vs. 1.9 percent) in the past year. *[Source: 2006 National Survey on Drug Use and Health.]*

#### At what age are teens abusing prescription drugs?

Kids as young as 12 are trying or using prescription drugs non-medically — to get high or for “self-medicating.” Pharmaceuticals are often more available to 12-year-olds than illicit drugs because they can be taken from the medicine cabinet at home, rather than marijuana which necessitates knowing someone who uses or sells the drug. Also, pills may have a perception of safety because they are easier to take than smoking pot or drinking alcohol and are professionally manufactured in a lab.

#### How can I talk to my kids about prescription drug abuse?

Starting a conversation about drugs with your kids is never easy — but it's also not as difficult as you may think. Take advantage of everyday “teachable moments” and, in no time at all, you'll have developed an ongoing dialogue with your child. Teachable moments refer to using everyday events

in your life to point out things you'd like your child to know about. When you talk to your kids about drugs, make a special point to tell them how dangerous prescription drug abuse is.

## 5 REASONS WHY TEENS ABUSE Rx DRUGS

1) These substances are **readily available** to teens – in their own medicine cabinets and the medicine cabinets of friends — and very often they're available *for free*. The Partnership's data are very much in line with the findings of the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, which shows over 75% of teenage prescription drug abusers saying they got those drugs from friends or family.

2) Teens' **perception of the risks of abuse** is relatively low. Partnership research shows that less than half of teens see "great risk" in trying prescription pain relievers such as Vicodin or Oxycontin that a doctor did not prescribe for them. Over one quarter of teens believe prescription pain relievers are not addictive. The University of Michigan's "Monitoring the Future" survey data going back more than thirty years demonstrates that the more teens perceive risk associated with any substance of abuse, the less likely they are to abuse that substance. On the other hand, the less risk teens associate with a drug, the more likely they are to abuse it. So low perception of risk, coupled with easy availability, is a recipe for ongoing problems.

3) Research conducted by the Partnership in 2007, with support from Abbott, cast new light on the *motivations of teens* to abuse prescription drugs. Traditionally, it was thought that teens abused illegal drugs and alcohol to "party," or to "self-medicate" for some serious problem or disorder: adolescent depression, for example.

But the Partnership's 2007 research, like the research done among college students by Carol Boyd and Sean McCabe at the University of Michigan, suggests a wider range of motivations for young people's abuse of prescription drugs, including "**life management**" such as using stimulants to help them cram for a test or lose weight, pain relievers to escape some of the pressure they feel to perform academically and socially, or tranquilizers to wind down at the end of a stressful day.

Once these substances have been integrated into teens' lives and abused as study or relaxation aids, it may become increasingly difficult to persuade teens that these drugs are unnecessary or unsafe when taken without a prescription.

4) **Parents** are the most valuable resource in preventing teen drug use, but they are not always aware of teens' prescription drug abuse, a behavior that was probably not on their radar when they were teenagers. They find it hard to understand the scale and purposefulness with which today's teens are abusing medications, and it's not immediately clear to them that the prime source of supply for abusable prescription drugs is likely to be their own medicine cabinet. Furthermore, many parents themselves are misusing, or perhaps abusing, prescription drugs without having a prescription. In the Partnership's study with Abbott, 28% of parents said they had used a prescription drug without having a prescription for it, and 8% of parents said they had given their teenager an Rx drug that was not prescribed for the teen.

5) **Our efforts as a nation – to date at least — have been inadequate.** There has simply not been the public attention or resources devoted to this issue that we have seen for other emerging drug threats.