



The U.S. Department of Education's

**HIGHER
EDUCATION
CENTER**

for Alcohol,
Drug Abuse, and
Violence Prevention

PREVENTION UPDATE

Prescription and Over-the-Counter Drug Abuse Prevention

Overview

According to the [White House Office of National Drug Control Policy](#), “abuse of prescription drugs to get high has become increasingly prevalent among teens and young adults. Past year abuse of prescription pain killers now ranks second—only behind marijuana—as the Nation’s most prevalent illegal drug problem.”

Use of prescription drugs without a doctor’s prescription or only for the experience or feeling they cause is commonly referred to as “nonmedical” use. As noted above, prescription painkillers, such as hydrocodone, oxycodone, and morphine, provide indispensable medical benefit, but when taken without a physician’s direction can cause serious adverse consequences and produce dependence and abuse. According to the [Drug Abuse Warning Network](#), approximately 363,000 emergency department visits in 2007 involved the nonmedical use of pain relievers (including both prescription and over-the-counter [OTC] pain medications). Ritalin, Adderall, Concerta, and Dexadrine, which are all classified as stimulants and have been dubbed “study drugs,” are being used on college campuses to increase energy, alertness, mood, and well-being. These “study drugs” come with their own set of risks if they are taken without a prescription, including irregular heartbeat, high body temperatures, cardiovascular failure, and seizures. Some OTC medications, such as cough and cold medicines containing dextromethorphan, have beneficial effects when taken as recommended; but they can also be abused and lead to serious adverse health consequences. According to the [National Survey on Drug Use and Health](#), about 3.1 million persons aged 12 to 25 (5.3 percent) had misused OTC cough and cold medications at least once in their lifetime.

What the Evidence Tells Us

According to the [Monitoring the Future](#) survey, current (past month) abuse of controlled prescription drugs by college students has been increasing. From 1993 to 2005, the rate of student abuse of prescription opioids rose 342.9 percent from 0.7 percent to 3.1 percent. This equals approximately 240,000 full-time students. Over that same period, abuse of prescription stimulants rose 93.3 percent to 225,000 students; abuse of prescription tranquilizers rose 450 percent to 171,000 students; and abuse of prescription sedatives rose 225 percent to 101,000 students. Rates of all forms of prescription drug abuse among college students now surpass the rates of all forms of illicit drug use except marijuana. According to a 2010 study published in the [Journal of Clinical Psychiatry](#), among college students, friends and peers are the most common sources to obtain prescription drugs to use nonmedically. “Studies have shown that users who obtain these drugs from their peers . . . are at increased risk for concurrent alcohol and other drug use, heavy drinking, alcohol abuse, illicit drug abuse, and alcohol- or drug-related problems.” A study in [Addiction](#) found that stimulant medication abuse was more prevalent among students who were white (4.9 percent versus 1.6 percent for African Americans and 1.3 percent for Asians); members of fraternities or sororities (8.6 percent versus 3.5 percent for nonmembers); and earning lower grades (5.2 percent for grade point average of B or lower versus 3.3 percent for B+ or higher). Students who abused prescription stimulants reported higher levels of cigarette smoking; heavy drinking; risky driving; and abuse of marijuana, MDMA (Ecstasy), and cocaine. Compared



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with other survey respondents, for example, they were 20 times as likely to report past-year cocaine abuse and 5 times as likely to report driving after heavy drinking. Students attending colleges in the Northeast, schools with more competitive admission standards, and noncommuter schools reported higher rates of abuse.

What Campuses Are Doing

The Ohio State University College of Pharmacy

The [Generation Rx Initiative](#) Web site developed by the Ohio State University (OSU) College of Pharmacy provides medication safety and prescription drug abuse prevention resources for schools, colleges, and communities. The goal of the Generation Rx Initiative is to enhance the public's understanding of medication safety issues in general, and those relating to prescription drug abuse in particular. It includes links to a range of resources for college students, including *Generation Rx and the Abuse of Medications in a Drug-Taking Society*, a booklet designed for use in OSU First-Year Success Series workshops. The workshops are designed to lead first-year college students through a discussion relating to causes and consequences of the rising abuse of prescription and OTC medications. It concludes with a general focus on medication safety guidelines.

Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas

Southern Methodist University's (SMU) [Live Responsibly](#) program Help for Prescription Drug Abuse provides information and referrals for students (themselves or someone they know) who are abusing or misusing prescription drugs and are experiencing problems. The program includes extensive information on prescription drug abuse and associated dangers. It links to SMU's Center for Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention, which provides assessments, interventions, referrals, and short-term counseling, as well as ongoing support for recovering students. In addition, the center sponsors the Because I Care program, a one-hour module taught in conjunction with TIPS (Training for Intervention Procedures), which provides students with the information and skills they need to intervene with peers who are using drugs.

National Prescription Drug Take-Back Day

The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration sponsored a [National Prescription Drug Take-Back Day](#) on Sept. 25, 2010. More than 4,000 sites nationwide joined the effort that sought to prevent increased pill abuse and theft. Government, community, public health, and law enforcement partners [collected more than 242,000 pounds](#) of potentially dangerous expired, unused, and unwanted prescription drugs for destruction. The service was free and anonymous, no questions asked. Numerous college campuses, such as the University of California, San Diego, and the University of Maryland, College Park, took part in the event.

Higher Education Center Resources

- *Other Drug Use and Abuse on Campus: The Scope of the Problem* (April 2009): <http://www.higheredcenter.org/files/product/other-drugs.pdf>
- *Catalyst* Winter 2006 Vol. 7 No. 2: <http://www.higheredcenter.org/files/product/catalyst19.pdf>
- Webinar: "Creating a Campus-Based Prescription Drug Abuse Prevention Program": <http://www.higheredcenter.org/services/training/webinars/creating-a-campus-based-prescription-drug-abuse-prevention-program>

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