

What is prescription drug abuse?

Prescription drug abuse is the intentional use of a medication without a prescription, in a way other than as prescribed, or for the experience or feeling it causes.

It is not a new problem, but one that deserves renewed attention. Although prescription drugs can be powerful allies, they also pose serious health risks related to their abuse.

Why do people abuse prescription drugs?

Some people think that prescription drugs are safer and less addictive than street drugs. Some people experiment with prescription drugs, because they think they will help them have more fun, lose weight, fit in and even study more effectively.

Prescription drugs can be easier to get than street drugs—family members or friends may have them, and they're also sometimes sold on the street like other illegal drugs.

Taking prescription drugs in a way that hasn't been recommended by a doctor can be more dangerous than people think. In fact, it's drug abuse. And it's just as illegal as taking street drugs.

Prescription drugs are only safe for the individuals who actually have prescriptions for them. That's because a doctor has examined these people and prescribed the right dose of medication for a specific medical condition. The doctor has also told them exactly how they should take the medicine, including things to avoid while taking the drug—such as drinking alcohol, smoking, or taking other medications. They also

are aware of potentially dangerous side effects and can monitor patients closely for these.

Why are older adults at risk for prescription drug abuse?

Older adults are at risk for prescription drug abuse primarily because they take more prescription medications than other age groups. Americans 65 years of age or older make up only 13% of the U.S. population, yet they consume approximately 33% of all prescription drugs. Older adults are also at risk for prescription drug abuse because they often take more than one prescription medication each day. This increases the risk for mistakes when taking the medicines and for drug interactions. In addition, growing older slows down your liver's ability to filter medicines out of your body. This means that an older adult might become addicted to or have side effects from a prescription drug at a lower dose than a younger adult.

What medicines increase the risk for abuse?

A person can abuse any type of prescription drug, but elderly adults commonly take 2 types of medicines that have high potential for addiction:

- Opioids are prescription drugs used to control pain. They include medicines such as oxycodone (OxyContin), oxycodone combined with acetaminophen (Percocet), and hydrocodone combined with acetaminophen (Vicodin). A person can become addicted to opioids if they take an opioid for a long period of time, or if they take too much of the opioid.
- Benzodiazepines are prescription drugs used to treat anxiety, panic attacks, or insomnia. They include medicines

such as diazepam (Valium), alprazolam (Xanax), clonazepam (Klonopin), and lorazepam (Ativan). A person can become addicted to and feel like he or she needs more of these drugs if the medicine is taken for a long period of time.

Other prescription drugs used to control pain or treat sleeping problems may also cause addiction.

What type of treatment is available for prescription drug abuse?

The options available for effectively treating prescription drug addiction depend on the medication being abused.

Treatment for pain reliever addiction often includes medication combined with behavioral counseling. A recent large-scale clinical trial supported by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) showed that Suboxone (buprenorphine + naloxone), often prescribed in primary care settings, helped about half of the participants reduce their pain reliever abuse during extended Suboxone treatment. Another promising approach includes long-acting formulations of medications, such as Vivitrol, a depot formulation of the opioid receptor blocker, Naltrexone, which was recently approved by the FDA to treat opioid addiction. With effects that last for weeks, instead of hours or days, long-acting formulations stand to aid in treatment retention and abstinence.

Although no medications exist yet to treat addiction to central nervous system depressants or to prescription stimulants, behavioral therapies proven effective in treating other drug addictions may be used. The NIDA is

also supporting multiple studies to identify promising medications for stimulant addiction.

Prescription Drug Addiction Assessment Tool

The purpose of this self-test is to enlighten you about your own level of prescription drug use. Do not stop taking your medication unless you first talk to your doctor. Please answer each question honestly, with a yes or no answer.

- Have you ever manipulated or lied to a doctor to obtain prescription drugs?
- Have you ever stolen prescription drugs or stolen to obtain prescription drugs?
- Do you regularly use a prescription medication in a way that it is unintended (for example, increased dosage)?
- Have you ever taken one prescription drug to overcome the effects of another?
- Do you avoid people and places that do not approve of you using prescription drugs?
- Has your job or school performance ever suffered from the effects of your prescription drug use?
- Have you ever lied about what or how much you use?
- Do you put the purchase of drugs ahead of your financial responsibilities?
- Does using interfere with your sleeping or eating?
- Does the thought of not having prescription drugs worry you?
- Do you feel it is impossible for you to live without your prescription drug(s)?
- Do you feel depressed and/or suicidal

because of your prescription drug use?

- Is your prescription drug use making your social or home life unhappy?
- Have you ever felt defensive, guilty, or ashamed about using drugs?
- Do you think a lot about a certain prescription drug or drugs?
- Do you use prescription drugs because of pain or stress?
- Do you continue to use despite knowing its negative physical or psychological consequences?

If you answered “yes” to more than three of these questions, you should contact the Archbold Northside HELpline for information on treatment options.

**Archbold Northside Center
for Behavioral and Psychiatric Care
401 Old Albany Road
Thomasville, Georgia 31792**

(229) 228-8208

24-Hour HELpline (800) 238-8661

www.archbold.org/northside

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