



Taking prescription drugs not prescribed for you by a doctor or in a way that hasn't been recommended by a doctor, can be more dangerous than you think. **In fact, it can be fatal.**

Prescription drugs are the third most commonly abused category of drugs, behind alcohol and marijuana and ahead of cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine. Some prescription drugs can become addictive, especially when used in a manner inconsistent with their labeling by someone other than the patient for whom they were prescribed, or when taken in a manner or dosage other than prescribed. Overall, an estimated 48 million people have abused prescription drugs, representing nearly 20% of the U.S. population.

**The prescription drug medications that are most commonly abused include:**

- Pain relievers
- Tranquilizers and sedatives
- Stimulants

For additional information about specific prescription drugs by drug category, street name, how it is used and health risks: [Selected Prescription Drugs With Potential For Abuse](#).

**What are prescription pain relievers?**

Prescription pain relievers include the opioid class of drugs, such as hydrocodone (*i.e.*, Vicodin), oxycodone (*i.e.*, OxyContin), morphine, fentanyl and codeine. Opioids work by mimicking the body's natural pain-relieving chemicals, attaching to receptors in the brain to block the perception of pain. Opioids can produce drowsiness, nausea, constipation, and slow breathing. Opioids also can induce euphoria by affecting the brain regions that mediate what we perceive as pleasure.

**Dangers when abused:**

- Highly addictive
- Can slow one's breathing to dangerous levels, including accidental overdose
- Particularly dangerous when used in combination with alcohol

**What are tranquilizers and sedatives?**

Tranquilizers and sedatives are central nervous system depressants, such as Xanax, Valium, and Librium, which are often prescribed to treat anxiety, panic attacks and sleep disorders.

Central nervous system depressants, known as barbiturates and benzodiazepines, slow normal brain function to produce a drowsy or calming effect.

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Dangers when abused:

- Can slow breathing and heartbeat, especially if combined with other prescriptions, alcohol, or over-the-counter (OTC) cold and allergy medications
- Can lead to withdrawal and seizures when discontinued after prolonged use

**What are stimulants?**

Stimulants such as Ritalin, Adderall and Dexedrine increase alertness, attention and energy and are often prescribed for health conditions such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, narcolepsy and depression. Stimulants enhance the effects of norepinephrine and dopamine in the brain, increase blood pressure and heart rate, constrict blood vessels, and open up the pathways of the respiratory system. They can also produce a sense of euphoria.

Dangers when abused:

- Addictive
- Can create extremely high body temperature
- Can cause seizures/irregular heartbeat

**Alarming Trends in Prescription Drug Use:**

Although prescription drug abuse affects many Americans, some concerning trends can be seen among older adults, adolescents and women.

**Seniors and Elderly:** Seniors and the **elderly** are at significant risk for prescription drug abuse in which they intentionally or unintentionally take too much medication or medications that are not medically necessary. In addition, a large percentage of older adults also use over-the-counter (OTC) medicines and dietary supplements, sometimes in combination with alcohol, increasing the potential for negative drug interactions and cognitive impairment.

**Adolescents/Teens:** The non-medical use of prescription drugs has been rising steadily for **adolescents**, particularly in the area of prescription pain relievers, anti-anxiety medications, stimulants and steroids. With a greater number of prescriptions being written, such drugs are more widely available (including parents' prescriptions) and abusers may mistakenly believe that such drugs, because they come from a doctor, are safer to take than street drugs. The possible combination with alcohol significantly increases the risk of accidental overdose.

**Young Women:** Overall, men and women have roughly similar rates of prescription drug abuse, though an exception is found among 12- to 17-year-olds. In this age group, young **women** are more likely than men to misuse psychotherapeutic drugs. In addition, research has shown that women are at increased risk for non-medical use of painkillers and tranquilizers.

People of all ages abuse prescription drugs for a number of reasons, including:

- To feel good or get high
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- To relax or relieve tension (painkillers and tranquilizers)
- To reduce appetite (stimulants)
- To experiment
- To be accepted by peers (peer pressure) or to be social
- To be safe — it's a false belief that prescription drugs are safer than street drugs
- To be legal — it's a mistaken thought that taking prescription drugs without a prescription is legal
- To feed an addiction

### Recognizing prescription drug abuse, symptoms include:

- Stealing, forging or selling prescriptions
- Taking higher doses than prescribed
- Excessive mood swings
- Increase or decrease in sleep
- Poor decision-making
- Appearing to be high, unusually energetic or revved up, or sedated
- Continually "losing" prescriptions, so more prescriptions must be written
- Seeking prescriptions from more than one doctor

### Treatment and Recovery From Prescription Drug Addiction:

Addiction to any drug (illicit or prescribed) is a disease that, like other chronic diseases, can be treated. In fact, millions of people are living in long-term recovery. No single type of treatment is appropriate for all individuals addicted to prescription drugs. Treatment must take into account the type of drug used and the needs of the individual and may need to incorporate several components, including detoxification, counseling, and, in some cases, the use of pharmacological therapies as well as mutual aid/self help and recovery support.

For additional information about available resources, [Get Help](#).

A personal story, by Anonymous

The following is the personal story of an individual affected by the use and abuse of Adderall.

It was the toughest semester of my life. I was taking six classes, my grandmother had passed away just days before finals, and I was too emotionally and mentally shot to focus on anything. Hours slid by and nothing was getting done. My worst fear was coming true—I was going to fail my exams.

***After venting to my friend about my troubles, he responded by handing me a little blue tablet marked AD 10. Having never taken any prescription pill, I was a bit hesitant, but considering my desperate circumstances, I decided to down it. Subtle stimulation is one thing, such as a caffeine rush, but encephalic overdrive characterized by robotic like tunnel vision that allows you to scan hundreds of pages of bland text with no desire to stop, is literally a mind blowing sensation. An electric wave of euphoria pulsed through my body giving me a sense of intellectual invincibility. Before I knew it, I was Barry Bonds in the library and Adderall was my academic steroid—every final was knocked out of the park.***

***Tired of buying overpriced pills from friends, I decided to get an ADHD screening. By the end of a seemingly nonchalant psychiatric evaluation—during which I was asked if I had ever tried a friend's Adderall prescription to which I answered yes—I was prescribed 50 mg a day because the doctor considered me to be a "big guy."***

***At first the pills came off as a miracle drug but it wasn't long before I developed an unshakable***

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*amphetamine dependence that reduced me to the likes of a wired zombie. Fast forward 8 months later, I was arrested in a sensationalized campus drug bust for selling some of my prescription to an undercover. Long story short, I not only overdosed and nearly died from America's favorite study aid, it cost me my full-ride scholarship, it led to thousands in legal fees, and it ruined my life for quite some time. Socrates was killed because he was convicted of corrupting the youth, but if you ask me the lax distribution and institutional endorsement of amphetamine study aids are what is truly poisoning the youth.*