



About Prescription Drug Use and Abuse

Fact:

More than 9 million Americans use prescription drugs for non-medical purposes.*

Fiction:

It's a myth that prescription drug abuse is less dangerous because the substances are legal.

Prevention:

Good communication between doctor and patient can help prevent substance abuse, and detect it early if it occurs.

Treatment:

Behavioral intervention, drug treatment, or both may be required.

Prescription drugs improve millions of lives when taken for their prescribed purposes. But too many people use them for recreation, to get high, to get a lift or to calm down.

About Dependence

Physical dependence develops when a person takes an elevated dose for long enough that the body adapts and develops a tolerance for the drug. At this point, they need more and more of the drug to experience the desired effect, and withdrawal symptoms will occur if the drug is stopped abruptly.

Psychological dependence is habit. The person becomes accustomed to having the drug as part of his or her life, and becomes preoccupied with obtaining and using drugs regardless of the consequences.

Researchers don't know why some people begin to abuse prescription drugs while others don't. However, a personal or family history of alcoholism or other dependencies increase the risk.

Dilemma for Doctors

Doctors receive little training on chemical dependency in medical school. And in a survey from the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, nearly half of primary care physicians report they have difficulty discussing substance abuse with patients. Some doctors worry so much about prescribing potentially addictive substances that they may underprescribe these drugs when they're needed, such as for pain management. Other doctors have great difficulty saying "no" to patients.

Prevention

To help prevent prescription drug abuse and to use drugs safely:

- Always follow medication directions carefully
- Don't change doses without talking to your doctor
- Don't stop taking medication on your own
- Don't crush or break pills meant to be taken whole
- Know the drug's warnings about driving or operating machinery
- Learn about the drug's interactions with alcohol, other prescriptions, or over-the-counter drugs
- Inform your doctor if you have a past history of substance abuse
- Don't use other people's medications, and don't share yours**

Parents of children taking medications such as Ritalin and Dexedrine for attention deficit disorder/attention deficit hyperactivity disorder need to be aware of the potential for abuse, as well as sharing with or selling to other kids. Physicians of these children need to also keep their eyes open for potential abuse of these drugs by parents.

Treatment

Detoxification is a first stage to purge drugs from the body before treatment begins. Addiction is a disease that is generally then treated with behavioral intervention, drug treatment, or a combination.

For example, addiction to opioid painkillers such as morphine, codeine, Percodan or OxyContin may be treated with behavioral intervention and methadone treatment. Methadone, given orally, maintains the physical dependency through slow release into the body. This helps reduce the craving for the more dangerous injection or inhalation of illegal drugs.

* National Institute on Drug Abuse

** Food and Drug Administration

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