Prescription Drug Abuse

Prescription drug abuse is a growing problem in many countries. Abuse occurs when a person, with or without a prescription, intentionally takes a prescription drug to get high or for some reason other than what the drug is intended to treat.

Prescription drug abuse is not the same as misuse. A person with a valid drug prescription can misuse by not following the doctor’s directions properly. Sometimes, people think that taking more of a drug will make its effect happen more quickly. Prescription drug instructions are carefully developed and serious consequences, like overdosing, can occur when these instructions are not followed.

Read more to learn about the categories of commonly abused prescription drugs and their dangers.

- Narcotic Pain Medications
- Sedatives and Tranquilizers
- Stimulants
- Resources

Narcotic Pain Medications

These are opioid medications that are often prescribed to treat acute or chronic pain, or as a post-surgical recovery aid. Drugs that fall into this category include Codeine, OxyContin, Percocet and Vicodin. When abused, they are often swallowed or injected.

The short-term effects can include:

- Relief from pain
- Euphoria or feelings of well-being
- Drowsiness
- Constipation
- Slowed breathing

Taking a large single dose of prescription pain relievers can cause severe respiratory depression that can lead to death. Use of prescription pain relievers with other substances that depress the central nervous system, such as alcohol, antihistamines, barbiturates, benzodiazepines or general anesthetics, increases the risk of life-threatening respiratory depression.

Chronic use or abuse of opioids can result in physical dependence, and withdrawal symptoms can occur if use is reduced or stopped. Symptoms of withdrawal include:

- Restlessness
- Muscle and bone pain
- Insomnia
- Diarrhea
- Vomiting
- Cold flashes with goose bumps
- Involuntary leg movements
Tolerance to the drugs' effects also occurs with long-term use, so users must take higher doses to achieve the same or similar effects as experienced initially.

**Sedatives and Tranquilizers**

These prescription medications act as central nervous system depressants. Barbiturates (sedatives) are prescribed for acute anxiety, tension and sleep disorders, while benzodiazepines (tranquilizers) are prescribed for anxiety, acute stress reactions and panic attacks. Drugs that fall into this category include Mebaral, Quaaludes, Xanax and Valium. When abused, they are swallowed or injected.

The short-term effects can include:

- Euphoria
- Slurred speech
- Shallow breathing
- Sluggishness
- Fatigue
- Disorientation and lack of coordination
- Dilated pupils
- Impairment of memory, judgment and coordination
- Irritability
- Paranoia
- Suicidal ideation

Using prescription sedatives and tranquilizers with other substances -- particularly alcohol -- can slow breathing, or slow both the heart and respiration, possibly leading to death.

Some people experience a paradoxical reaction to these drugs and become agitated or aggressive.

Chronic use or abuse of these depressants can result in physical dependence, and withdrawal symptoms can occur if use is reduced or stopped. Abruptly stopping the drug can create a rebound effect in the brain, possibly leading to seizures and other harmful consequences.

**Stimulants**

These are a class of drugs that enhance brain activity. Prescription stimulants were used historically to treat asthma, obesity, neurological disorders and a variety of other ailments, before their potential for abuse and addiction became apparent.

Medically, they are now prescribed for only a few health conditions, including narcolepsy, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder and short-term treatment of obesity. Drugs that fall into this category include Adderall, Dexedrine and Ritalin. They are swallowed or injected when abused.

The short-term effects can include:

- Increased blood pressure and heart rate
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- Constricted blood vessels
- Increased blood glucose
- Increased breathing
- Increased alertness, attention and energy
- Euphoria

Taking high doses of some stimulants repeatedly over a short time can lead to feelings of hostility or paranoia. Additionally, taking high doses of a stimulant may result in dangerously high body temperatures and an irregular heartbeat. There is also the potential for cardiovascular failure (heart attack) or lethal seizures.

Resources
The information on this page was compiled from documents found on the website of the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). For more information, visit their website at www.nida.nih.gov.

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