

Prescription for Disaster?

Understanding the pitfalls and possibilities of prescription medications

According to the *Psychiatric Times*, at least 50 percent of all emergency room visits for drug-related problems are connected to prescription drug misuse or overdose. It accounts for approximately a third of all drug abuse in the United States annually.

Prescription drug abuse has become a topic of discussion because, in part, of the spotlight on medications such as Oxycontin®. It is important to note that the medications themselves, when used according to the prescribed method, can be effective in treating and combating many conditions; however, when abused, misuse of prescription and over-the-counter medications can lead to psychological and physical dependence. All medications should be taken as prescribed in terms of dosage,

frequency and duration.

As early as 1995, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) National Household Survey of Drug Abuse showed that an alarming 21 million people in the U.S. over the age of 12 have used one or more psychotherapeutic drugs (stimulants, sedatives, tranquilizers and analgesics available through prescription) for non-medical purposes at some time in their lives. More recent studies in 1999 by the Department of Health and Human Services showed that an estimated six million people routinely abuse prescription medications. While no one organization has been able to pinpoint exactly how many people suffer from prescription medication abuse, it is not that the number that is as important as it is the problem is growing. Prescription medication addiction can occur at any stage in an individual's life and last throughout his/her lifetime.

Many times, prescription medication abusers do not equate themselves with other drug addicts, do not recognize themselves as having a problem, and are difficult to identify by those around

them. However, without treatment, prescription medication abuse destroys an individual's personal life, family, and takes numerous lives each year.

What Is Abuse?

Prescription drug abuse is best defined as using a prescription medication or over-the-counter medication in any way other than the specified instructions given by the physician or on the medication label and using any prescription medication not specifically prescribed for an individual.

Prescription medication abuse can take place daily or during specified times of binging, when an individual uses a prescription medication on an irregular basis.

Abuse can lead to dependence, both psychological and physical. Once dependence is created, the individual may have withdrawal symptoms (negative psychological and physical symptoms if the drug is stopped or decreased in dosage) once their medication has run out and may continue to pursue additional avenues of obtaining the medication by "physician shopping", going to several physicians in an area, or by some illegal means. By moving from physician to physician, the individual may be able to obtain enough of the medication to allow him/her to continue in frequency



and dosage. However, eventually, the body begins to develop an immunity to the effects of the medication, thereby causing the body to crave larger dosages to maintain the same effects as the original dosage had in the beginning. This immunity is known as tolerance and can cause the withdrawal symptoms to be greater when the individual stops taking the medication.

Chronic Pain

The primary reason most people go to see a physician is because of pain. Chronic pain is a common cause of dependence and tolerance to prescription medications. It is defined as pain that has been present for six months or longer, or pain that is persistent beyond the usual expected time of healing. It is believed that as many as one in ten Americans will be afflicted by chronic pain, such as back pain or migraine headaches.

According to The Psychiatric Times, fifty percent of all patients with chronic pain take between one and five medications per day. Of those, upwards of twenty-five percent may become addicted. Because of this potential, many physicians are less likely to prescribe pain medication for more than thirty days at a time to monitor the individual's tolerance.

What Are The Most Common Types Of Abused Prescription Medications?

The most addictive types of medications are stimulants, narcotics and sedatives. Within each of these types, both over-the-counter and prescription medications are



available. Some examples of medications included within each type of medication include:

- Stimulants, which cause the central nervous system to speed up, of which one of the side effects of is hunger suppression. Examples: diet pills, Ritalin® (both of which are amphetamines) and caffeine
- Narcotics, which cause a person to have a momentary rush or pleasurable sensation and act primarily as pain medication. Examples: cough medicines containing codeine, pain-killing medications (such as codeine and morphine), Demerol®, and Percodan®
- Sedatives, which work to slow the body down, causing drowsiness. Examples: medications containing alcohol such as cold remedies, sleeping pills, and Valium®

All the medications prescribed by

physicians can be both useful and safe when taken according to the instructions of the physician. It is a mistake to condemn a medication or avoid entirely because of the possibility of becoming addicted to that medication. When taken properly, each type of medication has its place and purpose, which can be very effective in treating medical and physical conditions.

What Are The Effects Of Abusing Prescription Medications?

There are primarily two types of effects on the human body when an individual is abusing medications, they are physical and psychological.

Physical

- Changes in heart rate, blood pressure and breathing
- Dilated pupils
- Hot and cold flashes

- Nausea, vomiting and diarrhea leading to unexplained weight loss
- Low grade fever, sweating and sluggishness

Psychological

- Irritability, depression, paranoia
- Not wanting to be around others or attend social functions
- Sexual problems
- Difficulty paying attention and remembering
- Not enjoying activities that were formerly enjoyed

Many of these symptoms occur when the individual stops taking the medication. Withdrawal can cause the individual to begin taking the medication again to stop the symptoms. The type of discomfort and the degree depend on the medication being abused and its potency.

How Can Someone Know Who May Be An Addicted Individual?

A profile of an individual with a prescription medication addiction may include:

- Ready access to medications
- Chronic pain or multiple injuries over time requiring a continuous supply of medications

- Asking others for their leftover medications
- Often taking family members' prescriptions
- Use of multiple physicians and pharmacies to cover up the amount and frequency of prescription medication use
- Past history of addictive behaviors (e.g., alcoholism)
- Feigning physical or psychological problems
- Having dramatic and compelling but vague complaints
- Unconcerned with a diagnosis or keeping up with treatment in addition to the medication (i.e., missing appointments for x-rays, laboratory tests, or follow-up with another physician)
- Rejection of all forms of treatment other than medications

Unfortunately, denial is often centered on the fact that the individual is using a legal medication. It is important to note that legal medications can have the same addictive properties as illegal drugs and should be taken only as prescribed by the attending physician.

Somewhat surprisingly, a recent study by the Blume Group showed that more women than men abuse prescription medications. This is a change from the higher rates of abuse for men in alcohol and illegal drugs. In addition, the study showed that women are more likely to have additional psychological conditions that underlie the abuse than men.

The simplest and most reliable way to determine if an individual is abusing prescription medications is to learn if the individual has a legitimate medical condition and that the medication is being administered using the proper directions by an ethical physician.

How Can An Individual Prevent Prescription Medication Abuse?

There are a few simple steps to avoiding becoming addicted to prescription medications, they include:

- Follow the instructions printed on the medication label for all over-the-counter medications, if you want further clarification on the effect a medication may have, speak with a pharmacist.
- Follow the instructions of the physician and pharmacist for all prescription medications, if you have a question or concern, contact the physician that prescribed the medication for clarification on its effects.
- Never take medication that was prescribed by a physician for someone else

How Can Someone Overcome Abusing Prescription Medications?

The basic treatment principles for prescription medication abuse are the same as for most other forms of substance abuse, they include:

- Elimination of the prescription medication
- Detoxification of the body
- Medical and psychiatric evaluation for associated conditions and



Prescription Medication Abuse

complications

- Education about addiction, self-care and recovery
- Relief of stress and development of a healthier lifestyle
- Psychosocial treatment and support

Simply stopping taking the medication may not be enough, because the root behavior for the addiction will still be present. If an individual does not work on the underlying causes of the behavior in the beginning, he/she risks returning to the medication in the future or developing addictions to other medications. According to research, a very high percentage of individuals developing substance dependence also have one or more psychiatric conditions as underlying contributors.

The only effective method of treatment for overcoming dependence and to stop abusing prescription medications is to work with a behavioral health care professional. Because of the effects of withdrawal symptoms, it is best to have someone who has experience dealing with both the physical and psychological symptoms associated with stopping taking certain medications. For more information on prescription medication abuse and dependence, please contact the CARELINE at (800) 662-1002, for a free, confidential behavioral health care nurse who can help find the proper method of treatment for your condition.

Prescription Medication Scale

The following questions are a diagnostic tool that may be useful in determining if you are abusing prescription medications. Carefully answer each of the following questions as they relate to your prescription medication use over the past 12 months. Answer yes or no to the following questions:

1. Yes No Have you used medications other than those required for medical reasons?
2. Yes No Have you abused prescription medications?
3. Yes No Do you abuse more than one medication at a time?
4. Yes No Can you get through the week without using a medication?
5. Yes No Are you always able to stop using medications when you want to?
6. Yes No Have you had "blackouts" or "flashbacks" as a result of medication use?
7. Yes No Has medication abuse created problems between you and your spouse or your parents?
8. Yes No Have you lost friends because of your use of medications?
9. Yes No Do you feel guilty or bad about your use of medications?
10. Yes No Does your spouse or parents ever complain about your involvement with medications?
11. Yes No Have you neglected your family because of your use of medications?
12. Yes No Have you been in trouble at work because of medication abuse?
13. Yes No Have you lost a job because of medication abuse?
14. Yes No Have you gotten into fights when under the influence of medications?
15. Yes No Have you ever engaged in illegal activities in order to obtain medications?
16. Yes No Have you ever been arrested for possession of illegal medications (not prescribed for you by a physician)?
17. Yes No Have you ever experienced withdrawal symptoms (e.g., felt sick) when you stopped taking medications?
18. Yes No Have you had medical problems as a result of your medication use?
19. Yes No Have you gone to anyone for help for a medication problem?
20. Yes No Have you been involved in a treatment program specifically related to medication use?

Total all of your yes answers. _____

- 0 - 5 You may have a minor medication abuse problem
6 - 10 You may have a moderate medication abuse problem
11 - 15 You may have a substantial medication abuse problem
16 - 20 You may have a severe medication abuse problem

If you answered yes to one or more of the questions listed, you need to seek professional help to address your addiction. Even if you think that it's only a slight problem, medication abuse can and will grow into a much greater problem without professional attention and care.

(Medication Use Questionnaire DAST 20 from Elsevier Science)