



# Taking ACTION to prevent & address PRESCRIPTION DRUG ABUSE



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National Council on Patient Information and Education  
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## A Resource Kit for America's College Campuses

### “Get the Facts” Prescription Drug Abuse on College Campuses

While alcohol abuse and binge drinking still top the list of substance abuse issues on college campuses, the non-medical use of prescription drugs—most notably stimulants, sedatives and pain relievers—is a growing, yet unaddressed problem (SAMHSA, 2009; NCASA, 2007). In fact, about one in four college students has illegally used prescription drugs, and many more have been offered these medications by friends or fellow students.

Many students may not even realize that they, their roommate, teammate or friend are misusing or abusing these medications, most of which are controlled substances and, therefore, illegal to use without a prescription. When used the right way and under a doctor's supervision, prescription drugs are safe and effective in treating countless medical conditions. But taking these medications the wrong way or without a prescription puts young lives at risk (SAMHSA, 2009a).

#### Consider these facts:

- Although most college students use prescription drugs properly, about one in four people aged 18 to 20 report using these medications non-medically at least once in their lives (NSDUH, 2008).
- Non-medical use of pain relievers is on the rise among college-age youth (SAMHSA, 2009a). This age group also has the highest prevalence rate of non-medical use of prescription opioids in the US (McCabe *et al*, 2007).
- College students misuse prescription stimulants to “get in the zone” or pull all night study sessions—a habit that is most likely to begin in college (Teter *et al*, 2006). Among people 18 to 22 years of age, full-time college students are twice as likely to use a stimulant for non-medical reasons in the past year compared to those who aren't in college or are only part-time students (SAMHSA, 2009).
- By students' sophomore year in college, about half of their classmates will have been offered the opportunity to abuse a prescription drug (Arria, 2008).



## MAKING SENSE OF MISUSE AND ABUSE

Experts say it all comes down to intention and motivation (FDA, 2010).

Someone is **misusing** a prescription medication if they: take a medication that is prescribed to them differently or at a higher dose than is recommended by their healthcare professional to alleviate symptoms **or** try to self-medicate with someone else's medication. For example, popping a friend's Percocet (prescription pain medicine) to get rid of a headache or asking a roommate for a stimulant to pull an all-night study session before a big exam.

Intentionally using a prescription drug to experiment with it, feel good or get "high" is an example of **prescription drug abuse**. Someone who abuses prescription medications is also likely to combine them with alcohol and/or crush pills and then snort or inject them to get a quicker, more intense high.

Whatever the reason, using these medications without a prescription or medical oversight of their risks can lead to addiction, overdose and even death. It's also illegal.

## A SLIPPERY SLOPE: THE DANGERS OF PRESCRIPTION DRUG ABUSE

Many students mistakenly believe prescription medications are safe because they are FDA approved and prescribed by a doctor. But all medications have risks; and they are only safe when taken as directed by the person for whom they were prescribed. Misusing or abusing prescription medications is dangerous. It can jeopardize a person's future and lead to long-term health problems.

Abusing prescription medications can lead to:

- Increases in blood pressure or heart rate
- Organ damage
- Addiction
- Difficulty breathing
- Seizures
- Heart Attack
- Stroke
- Death

Using these medications without a prescription or medical oversight of their risks can lead to addiction, overdose and even death. It's also illegal.

Taking prescription medications inappropriately has also been linked to other high risk, unhealthy behaviors.

- Most college students (90%) who used Adderall (a medication used to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and narcolepsy) non-medically in the past year were also binge drinkers and more than half were heavy alcohol users (SAMHSA, 2009b).
- These students were almost three times as likely as those who had not used Adderall non-medically to have used marijuana in the past year, eight times more likely to have used cocaine or be non-medical users of prescription tranquilizers and five times more likely to have been non-medical users of prescription pain relievers (SAMHSA, 2009b).

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### A Perfect Storm

Roughly half (49%) of all college students binge drink and a growing number report misusing or abusing prescription drugs (NCASA, 2007). Taking these substances together or with other illicit drugs can quickly spell trouble, leading to dangerous interactions, possible overdose and death.

- In surveys, college students who took an opioid for reasons other than for pain relief (for example, getting high or experimenting) had a much greater risk of experiencing three or more drug-use related problems (McCabe et al, 2007).
- Research shows that students who take prescription drugs for non-medical reasons are at least five times more likely to develop a drug abuse problem than those who don't (McCabe, 2008).

The danger is that many of these substances have synergistic effects—for example prescription pain relievers and alcohol both slow breathing. By ingesting too much of both, someone can literally stop breathing.

### RECOGNIZE THE SIGNS, GET HELP

Because many undergraduates who engage in the non-medical use of prescription medications started before they entered college, access to treatment services and support is just as important as preventing others from starting.

Early signs of abuse include:

- Using the medication more frequently or at higher doses without a healthcare professional's direction
- Using the medication compulsively
- Not being able to carry out normal daily activities because of drug misuse

For more information read [\*\*“Warning Signs and Symptoms of Prescription Drug Abuse.”\*\*](#)

Students who think they or someone they know has a problem should consult their resident assistant, peer health educator, college student health services, family doctor or by finding a local treatment center by visiting the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's online treatment center locator at [www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov](http://www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov).



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### DRUGS OF CHOICE

The most highly abused prescription drugs among college students are:

	Used to treat	How they work in body	Potential problems if misused or abused
<b>Stimulants</b> (for example, Ritalin, Concerta, Adderall)	Narcolepsy, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and other conditions	Speed up brain activity causing increased alertness, attention, and energy that come with elevated blood pressure, increased heart rate and breathing	Can lead to dangerous increases in blood pressure, which places added strain on the heart. Dangerous increases in heart rate and respiration are also possible.
<b>Sedatives/tranquilizers</b> (for example, Valium, Xanax, Ativan, Klonopin, Ambien)	Anxiety, tension, panic attacks, and sleep disorders	Slow down or “depress” the functions of the brain and central nervous system	Can cause withdrawal seizures
<b>Opioid analgesics</b> (for example, Vicodin, OxyContin, Percocet, Methadone)	Moderate to severe pain, may be prescribed after surgery	Block pain messages from reaching the brain	Can cause respiratory depression, slow and shallow breathing

### REASONS FOR MISUSING OR ABUSING PRESCRIPTION DRUGS

Once away from home, students, often for the first time, are subject to the temptations and demands of college life without parental supervision and support.

While some students abuse prescription medications to feel good or get high, plenty of others turn to these medications to help manage their daily lives—to reduce the stress and anxiety of college life, boost their mood, stay up all night writing a term paper or increase their stamina on the field. Even the best and brightest can feel the pressure to fit in socially and excel academically.

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College students report misusing or abusing prescription medications to:

- Improve their grades
- Concentrate more in class and maintain focus during late-night study sessions and all nighters
- Diet
- Reduce stress
- Feel good/get high
- Ease nervousness in social scene / partying
- Enhance athletic performance
- Forget about problems

(McCabe *et al*, 2007; NCASA, 2007; White *et al*, 2006)

Further complicating the matter is the mistaken belief by teens and college-age kids that prescription medications are a safer alternative to illicit street drugs like cocaine or heroin (Quintero *et al*, 2006). These medications are also seen as acceptable and they are readily available. Most students get these medications from friends or family members by stealing, buying or simply asking for them. A majority (90%) of students are able to access stimulants from their peers or friends (McCabe *et al.*, 2004).

### THE UPSIDE: PRESCRIPTION DRUG ABUSE IS NOT THE NORM

Although prescription drug abuse on America's campuses is a major public health and safety concern, it's important for students to know that not everyone is doing it. Most college students know it's not worth the risk to misuse or abuse prescription medications

Still, the pressures and availability to misuse or abuse prescription drugs is a real issue on college campuses. By students' sophomore year in college, about half of their classmates will have been offered the opportunity to abuse a prescription drug (NSDUH, 2008; Arria, 2008). Of undergraduates that are taking stimulant medication under the direction of their doctor, more than half (54%) have been asked to sell, trade or give away their medication in the past year (McCabe *et al*, 2006).

### Getting to Root Cause

Understanding why college students misuse or abuse prescription drugs can help student leaders, parents, campus life administrators and advisors, coaches and health care providers ask the right questions and intervene early.

Prescription stimulants may be used by students as "study aids"— to increase energy, improve concentration, lower anxiety, boost their mood, and help them stay up all night cramming for exams. But unlike students who take these medications recreationally, to get a "high," thrill seek or "fit in" socially, a student who uses a stimulant to help improve his or her concentration and academic performance probably doesn't see their behavior as **risky or illegal** even though it is (Quintero *et al*, 2006).

**Educating students about misuse and abuse is an important part of prevention.**

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### KEEPING MEDICATIONS SAFE

Students who take prescription sedatives, stimulants or pain relievers under the care of their healthcare professional must take steps to help prevent problems by:

- Taking their medication as directed;
- Keeping it in a safe, dry and secure place (consider a lock box or somewhere that only you know about);
- Not sharing these medications with anyone, regardless of the reason. (If a college roommate sprains his ankle and pleads for a Percocet, stay strong. Instead of “sharing” a pain reliever, make sure your friend sees a medical professional for care. Remember, it is illegal to take controlled substance if it is not prescribed for you.
- Getting rid of old or unused medications properly. Visit the Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA) website at <http://www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/ucm101653.htm> and **RX Safe Disposal** at <http://www.smarxtdisposal.net>.

“ Misusing or abusing prescription drugs are NOT a safer way to get high, cope with stress or perform better at school or on the field. Misusing pain relievers and sedatives will only mask problems, not solve them. In fact, studies have found that taking stimulants to boost academic performance doesn’t result in better grades, but it does put long-term health at risk.”

### Take Action Today

Help raise awareness about the dangers of prescription drug misuse and abuse. Download the [“Taking Action to Prevent and Address Prescription Drug Abuse”](#) resource kit for college campuses at [www.talkaboutrx.org](http://www.talkaboutrx.org). The materials in this kit are designed to equip peer educators and campus leaders—residence assistants, Greek life leaders, those involved in student government and athletics—with timely and practical informational resources and programming ideas to educate college students about prescription drug abuse prevention and treatment.