

# Prescription Drug Abuse: A Growing Epidemic

The number of people in America who abuse prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) medications has skyrocketed. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) estimates that nearly 20% of individuals age 12 and older have used prescription drugs nonmedically. Especially vulnerable are preteens, teenagers, and young adults, for whom these substances represent an easy, cheap high. Disturbingly, more than three in five teens say prescription pain relievers are easy to get from the family medicine cabinet, while more than half say they are “available everywhere.” (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], *Prescription for Danger: A Report on the Troubling Trend of Prescription and Over-the-Counter Drug Abuse Among the Nation’s Teens*, January 2008)

According to federal statistics, abuse among older adults also has increased dramatically. Although people age 65 and older comprise only 13% of the population, they account for nearly one-third of all drugs prescribed in the U.S. Because these older patients are often prescribed long-term and multiple medications, they face an increased risk of unintentional or intentional misuse. SAMHSA predicts that, by 2020, the number of people age 50 and older who need treatment for substance abuse will double.

## Facts and Figures

- ★ According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, approximately 7 million Americans—2.8% of the U.S. population—abuse prescription pain relievers, tranquilizers, stimulants, and sedatives.
- ★ A SAMHSA report noted a large increase in the nonmedical use of prescription drugs among women age 60 to 64. (*Illicit Drug Abuse among Older Adults*)
- ★ Among adults age 65 and older, nonmedical prescription drug use is more common than marijuana use. (*Illicit Drug Abuse among Older Adults*)
- ★ Every day, 2,500 American teens try a prescription drug for the first time to get high. (Partnership for a Drug-Free America)
- ★ Four out of 10 teens believe prescription and OTC medicines are less addictive and less dangerous than street drugs. (Office of National Drug Control Policy, *Prescription for Danger*, January 2008)
- ★ According to the 2009 Monitoring the Future report, 5% of teens abused cough medicine in the past year. (University of Michigan, [www.monitoringthefuture.org](http://www.monitoringthefuture.org))
- ★ In 2007, 93% of unintentional poisoning deaths were caused by drugs. Opioid pain medications, such as methadone, hydrocodone, and oxycodone, were most commonly involved. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Wide-ranging Online Data for Epidemiologic Research*, 2010)
- ★ Pain relievers like Vicodin and OxyContin are the prescription drugs most commonly abused by teens. 70% of teens who have used pain relievers for nonmedical use report getting medications from friends or relatives. (NSDUH)
- ★ More than 16% of weekend, nighttime drivers tested were positive for illegal, prescription, or OTC medications in 2007. (NHTSA, *National Roadside Survey*)

### Proper Disposal of Unwanted Meds

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration and White House Office of National Drug Control Policy have developed the guidelines below to help consumers properly dispose of unneeded prescription and OTC medications:

- ★ Follow any disposal instructions on the drug label. Do not flush medications unless the instructions specifically say to do so.
- ★ If no instructions are given, take medications out of their containers and mix them with an undesirable substance (e.g., kitty litter, coffee grounds) to make them less appealing to children, pets, and others.
- ★ Place the mixture in a sealable bag, empty can, or other container before putting it in the trash in order to prevent leaks or tears.
- ★ Participate in community drug take-back events. Call your local trash and recycling service, local police or sheriff's office, or Triad to see if a take-back program is scheduled in your community. Many pharmacies now offer take-back services as well.
- ★ Before trashing or recycling empty medicine containers, always scratch off label information, including your name and Rx number, to protect your identity and privacy.

### Your Role in Prevention

There are many things older adults and their caregivers can do to keep themselves and those they love safe from the dangers of prescription and OTC drug abuse. Health care providers and law enforcement play an equally important role in helping to prevent abuse and report violations involving prescription and OTC medications.

### Older Adults and Caregivers

- ★ Keep your medications out of sight and out of reach of children and young adults who visit your home. Consider purchasing a small safe to store your medications securely.
- ★ Properly dispose of all unused and expired drugs.
- ★ When prescribed a new medication, tell your doctor and pharmacist what other drugs (as well as vitamins and supplements) you take, since these could interact with the new medication.
- ★ If you or someone you care for take(s) multiple medications, vitamins, and/or supplements, consider using a packaging service (e.g., AccuPax) to help ensure correct dosages.
- ★ Always follow your doctor's and pharmacist's instructions when taking your medication. Know what side effects may occur.
- ★ Never share prescription medications.

## Health Care Providers and Pharmacists

- ★ Provide patients with clear information and advice about how to take medications properly.
- ★ Look for false or altered prescription forms. Report suspected abuse to the appropriate authorities. Consider submitting prescription orders electronically.
- ★ Be aware of the physical signs of possible drug abuse in older adults: anxiety, memory loss, depression, agitation, changes in blood pressure, falls, fatigue, pain in upper abdomen, sleep disturbance, appetite and weight loss, weakness, and confusion. (American Geriatrics Society)
- ★ Be on the lookout for “doctor shoppers,” addicts who go from one health care provider to another seeking controlled substances.
- ★ Older patients who are prescribed medicines that could be abused should be monitored frequently and receive regular checkups.
- ★ Be aware that the sudden need for larger or more frequent doses of a medication may indicate the patient has become addicted.

## Law Enforcement

- ★ Contact the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration/U.S. Department of Transportation for information on drugged drivers and how to become a certified Drug Recognition Expert (DRE).
- ★ Educate your older adult community on controlling one’s medications using resource material available free from Triad.
- ★ When you encounter a driver who appears to be under the influence of drugs, complete a medical referral form to alert your state licensing agency or department of motor vehicles.
- ★ If you come into contact with suspected abusive primary caregivers (those who withhold drugs, steal drugs, or overmedicate), refer the suspected older adult abuse victim to your local area agency on aging or ombudsman program for further case review.
- ★ Sponsor prescription take-back day events in your city or county.
- ★ Learn to recognize the physical signs of drug abuse—in older adults as well as in younger people.
- ★ Become involved in, or start, a local Triad.
- ★ Education is key to preventing impaired driving. Lobby your state government to include drugged driving-related questions on licensing exams.

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## Resources

### AccuPax

(888) 600-9692  
[www.AccuPax.net](http://www.AccuPax.net)

### Administration on Aging

One Massachusetts Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20001  
[www.aoa.gov](http://www.aoa.gov)  
[www.aoa.gov/aoaroot/AoA\\_Programs/Elder\\_Rights/Ombudsman/index.aspx](http://www.aoa.gov/aoaroot/AoA_Programs/Elder_Rights/Ombudsman/index.aspx)  
(information on the Long-term Care Ombudsman Program)

### American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators

4301 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 400  
Arlington, VA 22203  
[www.aamva.org](http://www.aamva.org)

### Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

1600 Clifton Road  
Atlanta, GA 30333  
[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

### National Association of Triads (NATI)

1450 Duke Street  
Alexandria, VA 22314  
[www.nationaltriad.org](http://www.nationaltriad.org)

### National Family Partnership/Lock Your Meds™

2490 Coral Way, Miami, FL 33145  
[www.nfp.org](http://www.nfp.org)  
[www.lockyourmeds.org](http://www.lockyourmeds.org)  
<http://cmnfp.neworg.com/default.asp>  
[www.facebook.com/lockyourmeds](https://www.facebook.com/lockyourmeds)  
[www.nfp.org/userfiles/file/12pgMEDKit6-28-10.pdf](http://www.nfp.org/userfiles/file/12pgMEDKit6-28-10.pdf)  
(*Meducation: A Dose of Knowledge*)

### National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE  
West Building  
Washington, DC 20590  
[www.nhtsa.gov](http://www.nhtsa.gov)



**National Institutes of Health**  
**National Institute on Drug Abuse**  
6001 Executive Boulevard, Room 5213  
Bethesda, MD 20892-9561  
[www.nida.nih.gov/NIDAHome.html](http://www.nida.nih.gov/NIDAHome.html)

**Neuropsychopharmacology.org**  
<http://soundmedicine.iu.edu/extras/Drugs%20of%20Abuse%20and%20Aging.pdf>  
(*Drugs of Abuse and the Aging Brain*)

**Office of National Drug Control Policy**  
Drug Policy Information Clearinghouse  
P.O. Box 6000  
Rockville, MD 20849-6000  
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/ondcp>  
[www.theantidrug.com/pdfs/prescription\\_report.pdf](http://www.theantidrug.com/pdfs/prescription_report.pdf) (*Prescription for Danger: A Report on the Troubling Trend of Prescription and Over-the-Counter Drug Abuse Among the Nation's Teens*, January 2008)

**Partnership for a Drug-Free America**  
352 Park Avenue South, 9th Floor  
New York, NY 10010  
[www.drugfree.org](http://www.drugfree.org)

**StopMedicineAbuse.org**  
**Consumer Healthcare Products Association**  
900 19th Street NW, Suite 700  
Washington, DC 20006  
[www.stopmedicineabuse.org](http://www.stopmedicineabuse.org)

**U.S. Department of Health and Human Services**  
**Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration**  
<https://dawninfo.samhsa.gov/default.asp>  
(*Drug Abuse Warning Network*)  
<http://store.samhsa.gov/product/Illicit-Drug-Use-among-Older-Adults/NSDUH11-0901>  
(*Illicit Drug Use Among Older Adults*)

**U.S. Department of Transportation**  
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE  
Washington, DC 20590  
[www.dot.gov](http://www.dot.gov)

**U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration**  
[www.justice.gov/dea/index.htm](http://www.justice.gov/dea/index.htm)