

# Opioids: Need to Know

## Prescription Drugs and Heroin

Commonly used Rx among adolescence:  
#Oxy, #Percs, #Vike, #Dragon,

Addiction is a brain disease.

Opiates (e.g., Vicodin, Oxycontin for treatment of chronic pain) are among the most commonly abused substances in teens. Addiction is a significant possibility when these drugs are NOT taken as prescribed to treat a medical condition. Some

occurs because the body gets used to the effects of a drug and reacts if the drug is suddenly stopped or reduced—and withdrawal symptoms may result. These vary according to the drug being used. This can occur even in someone who is taking a drug as prescribed,

*Matt began using marijuana at age 11 and became addicted to opiates at age 15. "In the beginning," he explains, "I would always try to get pills because you know what you're getting. Eventually, that just got too expensive....so then you go for heroin because it's cheaper."*

[www.fbi.gov](http://www.fbi.gov) Chasing the Dragon

adolescents believe that because these drugs are legally prescribed, they pose no danger. Teens are able to obtain their own prescriptions after an injury, find the drugs in their family medicine cabinet, friends and neighbors. Long-term prescribed use of these medications or their abuse to get high can lead to physical dependence and in some people, addiction. These are not the same thing—physical dependence

and is one of the reasons why it is so important that prescription drugs be taken under the close supervision of a physician. Closely monitoring the patient for any signs of potential problems, doctors can take proper action to minimize or avoid withdrawal. Addiction is the compulsive, often uncontrollable use of drugs in spite of the negative consequences, which may or may not accompany

## Special Edition

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This special edition of the **SAP Networker** explores the recent trends in opioid prescription and heroin abuse among adolescents. Abuse of these drugs during adolescence presents significant challenges for parents and educators. This newsletter provides concise, need-to-know information regarding:

- Opioid Prescription drug use among teens
- Heroin

Please don't hesitate to contact Susan Tarasevich or David Suda with questions, or for further information. We love hearing from you!

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physical dependence.

In the brain, neurotransmitters such as dopamine send messages by attaching to receptors on nearby cells. The actions of these neurotransmitters and receptors cause the effects from prescription drugs.

Prescription opioid pain

*When heroin enters the brain, it is converted back into morphine. It then binds to opioid receptors, located in many areas of the brain and body, especially areas involved in the perception of pain and pleasure.*

*Short-term effects of heroin include a rush of good feelings and clouded thinking. For the first several hours after taking heroin, people want to sleep, and their heart rate and breathing slow down. When the drug wears off, some people may feel a strong urge to take more.*

medications bind to molecules on cells known as opioid receptors—the same receptors that respond to heroin. These receptors are found on nerve cells in many areas of the brain and body, especially in brain areas involved in the perception of pain and pleasure.

When a person ingests, injects or smokes an opiate, that drug seeks

out opiate receptors in the body.

**These receptors are typically located in the spinal cord, brain and gastrointestinal tract.** Once there, the opiates begin to decrease the sensation of pain. People with pain due to surgeries, cancer or chronic condition may feel significant pain relief from an opiate medication.

The opiate receptors begin to become less sensitive and the user must take higher doses of the drug to achieve the same effect. As a teen begins to experiment with higher and higher doses of the drug in order to get high, there is a greater risk of overdose. Opiates tend to slow breathing; teens who take high doses of opiates may stop breathing altogether. In fact the American Society of Addiction Medicine reports that some teens can overdose the very first time they use an opiate.

### *Heroin*

If you don't believe that there is Heroin in your high school, talk to law enforcement, the FBI and DEA. Suburban teens are most at risk for heroin addiction. This is largely because of the strategic marketing (low cost and ready availability) of drug dealers. Heroin is much less expensive than prescription opioids. Polydrug use among teens is also an important risk factor.

According to the CDC (2015), People who abuse or are dependent on:

- prescription opioid painkillers are 40 times more likely to abuse or be dependent on heroin.
- cocaine are 15 times more likely to abuse or be dependent on heroin.
- marijuana are 3 times more likely to abuse or be dependent on heroin.
- alcohol are 2 times more likely to abuse or be dependent on heroin.

Heroin purities can vary widely so that the user may not know how much of the drug he or she is truly taking. The [U.S. Department of Justice](#) concludes that heroin purity can range from 47 to 57 percent, depending on where it is produced.

Some drug dealers are “cutting”, that is, using an illicit version of fentanyl, an anesthesia drug, to increase the potency of heroin that has been diluted. Fentanyl is potentially lethal, even at very low levels, and 30-50 times more powerful than heroin.

## So What, Now What?

### Five things educators can do

Giving teens key messages about the nature of substances and impact in a developing brain is crucial. There are five tenets.

*Remind teens that no one ever intends to become addicted.* While trying pain pills just one time may seem harmless, addiction can happen very quickly for *some* individuals.

1. **Talk about the dangers of using someone else's medication.** This means not sharing ANY prescription medication. This also means never taking a pill from a friend. All medication needs to be supervised and should be administered in schools by the school nurse.
2. **Repeated use of drugs changes structure of the brain.** Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the effects of alcohol, marijuana and other drugs. The longer teens postpone use, the more time the brain has to develop in healthy ways. Teens don't start with heroin. Usually, they start with prescription drugs. If they have used other substances, there is increased risk for addiction.
3. **Let students know in many different ways that it's okay**

**to ask for help and asking for help is courageous.** Emphasize that treatment works. They can start by talking with the SAP Team, or visiting with their physician. In school, help is just down the hall.

4. **Set consistent consequences for drug use in school.** School policies define appropriate behavior for students. It is imperative that administrators and school staff with a reasonable suspicion that a student is under the influence of, or in possession of a health endangering compound or paraphernalia exercise the policy. Be sure that consequences also include an assessment by a licensed drug-alcohol professional. Make certain that they follow the recommendations from the assessment. Ask SAP to work with the student upon return to support their compliance with recommendations.
5. **Raise awareness. Give students an opportunity to learn about prescription drug abuse in different ways.**

The SALTWORKS Theater Company has created a new play that gets to the heart of teen prescription drug abuse.

### OFF 'SCRIPT – NEW

by Tom Long  
Grades 6-12

*The issue: misuse of prescription drugs*



The misuse of prescription drugs is often overlooked and unnoticed for too long. The cause and effect of pain killers can be very different for individuals and lead to a lifetime of treatment and suffering. In *Off 'Script*, three students share their stories of addiction to prescription drugs, the consequences of their actions, and their journey to hope and healing.

**[CLICK HERE TO VIEW VIDEO CLIP.](#)**

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*References and Resources for More Information*

<https://www.overdosefreepa.pitt.edu> OverdoseFreePA.org is a collaboration between Pennsylvania communities and organizations to increase community awareness and knowledge of overdose and overdose prevention strategies, as well as to support practices and initiatives that will decrease drug overdoses and deaths within our communities.

<http://www.acopc.pitt.edu/> The Allegheny County Overdose Prevention Coalition (ACOPC) is an independent collaboration of concerned organizations and individuals with the mission to reduce overdose deaths in Allegheny County. ACOPC implements prevention, intervention, and treatment strategies in a variety of locations and settings that target individuals at varying levels of risk for overdose.

[http://www.achd.net/pr/pubs/2015release/052115\\_nalaxone.html](http://www.achd.net/pr/pubs/2015release/052115_nalaxone.html) Allegheny County Health Department countywide standing order for naloxone, or Narcan.

<http://www.pamedsoc.org/MainMenuCategories/Laws-Politics/News-from-Harrisburg/Levine-presentation-on-opioids.html> Pennsylvania Physician General Rachel Levine, MD, spoke to the Pennsylvania Medical Society's Specialty Leadership Cabinet (PAMED's SLC) about the opioid abuse crisis in Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Department of Health's (DOH's) response, - See more at: <http://www.pamedsoc.org/MainMenuCategories/Laws-Politics/News-from-Harrisburg/Levine-presentation-on-opioids.html#sthash.olXAeWTN.dpuf>

<http://teens.drugabuse.gov/drug-facts/opioids-and-pain-relievers> Drug Facts: Opioids and Prescription Drugs, National Institute on Drug Abuse

<http://teens.drugabuse.gov/peerx> NIDA developed PEERx, an online educational campaign to discourage abuse of prescription drugs among teens. A component of the NIDA for Teens program, PEERx provides science-based resources—in an engaging format—for teens and teen leaders, counselors, and educators to encourage discussions about this important issue.

<http://headsup.scholastic.com/teachers> Printable lessons, articles for student use, digital interactive versions, leveled version (PDF) - grades 4-5 reading level, leveled digital interactive version and interactive supplements.

<http://headsup.scholastic.com/students/prescription-pain-medications> General information on prescription pain medication for students, parents, educators, administrators.