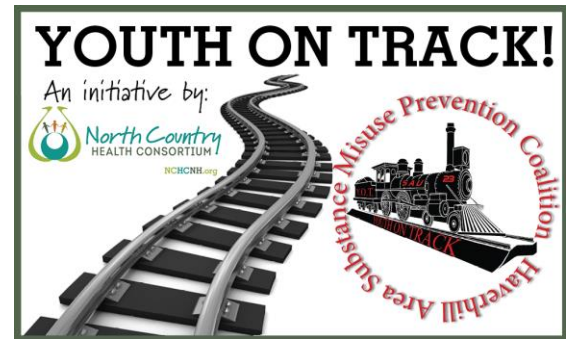


Keeping Your Children Safe from Dangers Inside the Home as Stay-at-Home Orders Continue: Part 1 Prescription Medication and Over-the-Counter Drug Misuse

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During this strange time, it's comforting to know that our families are at home together with the ability to keep children close and protected. While we can potentially shield young family members from harm in the outside world, there are hidden dangers in every home to which we must pay close attention.

According to the Partnership for a Drug-Free New Hampshire, prescription drug abuse has increased 200% in the State over the past 10 years, with one in six teens reporting they used prescription drugs without a doctor's prescription in their lifetime. The majority of prescription medications that are abused by teenagers come directly from the medicine cabinets of their family members or friend's families, often without the owner of the medication noticing anything is missing. Although the opioid epidemic still weighs heavily on our communities, when we talk about prescription drug misuse, opioid prescriptions are not the only types of medication that are being abused. "Prescription drug misuse" refers to any medications to which youth have access, including benzodiazepines, barbiturates, stimulants, and over-the-counter medications, such as cough and cold medications.

Similar to advertising around alcohol, there is an abundance of messaging for prescriptions that can leave youth with the impression that medications are a "quick fix" to many ailments with a pill for everything! With the prevalence of marketing to promote medications in print media, web advertising, and television commercials, adolescents are exposed to confusing messages about using substances to manage feelings of sadness, anxiety, overwhelming stress, difficulty sleeping, or staying up to study.

One of the most tell-tale signs that your child is misusing medications is finding that they have pills on them for unlikely or seemingly no reason. It is especially concerning if it is your teen's own medication that they are not taking as prescribed and carry it with them throughout the day. It is important to be aware of the sites your teen is visiting online because drugs can be purchased through these websites and give information about how to misuse drugs. Additionally, pay attention to your teen's peer groups. If they are aligning with peers who are actively misusing substances, it is likely that your teen may be doing the same. When it comes to recognizing physical warning signs and symptoms of prescription misuse, there are different ways in which your teen may display drug use depending on the type of prescription medications used. Most medications of abuse fall into one of three general categories: painkillers, depressants, and stimulants.

“Painkillers” is a general term often used in reference to many medications. Specifically, painkillers are opioids such as OxyContin, Oxycodone, Percocet, Vicodin and Codeine. These painkillers are extremely powerful, highly addictive, and potentially deadly, especially when taken in large doses or when mixed with alcohol. Someone who was abusing these medications would experience nausea and vomiting, lack of energy, have a hard time concentrating, and difficulty breathing. Stopping the use of these drugs can result in serious withdrawal symptoms and is often why users will resort to heroin, which binds to the same receptors in the brain as opioid painkillers to relieve withdrawal symptoms, and for a much cheaper cost.

Depressants are prescribed to help individuals with a variety of mental health related issues, such as anxiety or trouble sleeping, and fall into three categories: benzodiazepines, which are meant to address anxiety, barbiturates, which are meant for trouble sleeping, and non-benzodiazepinic sleep medications for sleeping disorder. Some of the brand names that you may have heard include, Valium, Xanax, Ambien, Lunesta, and Ativan. Depressants can cause the user to experience shallowed or trouble breathing and slowed heart rate to dangerously low levels, lack of coordination, impaired memory, motor skills and cognition, slurred speech, disorientation, or irritability.

Generally used to treat conditions such as Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Stimulants include name brand medications such as Adderall and Ritalin and are meant to help individuals focus and regulate behaviors. Some of the symptoms of stimulant medication abuse include sweating, tremors, anxiety, nervousness and/or paranoia, irregular heartbeat, high body temperature, and even seizures or death from organ and/or heart failure.

Available at almost any grocery store or supermarket and without a doctor’s prescription, over-the-counter (OTC) medications can be easier to access than prescription medications and are just as dangerous. The most commonly misused or abused OTC medications are those meant to treat coughs and colds because of the active ingredient Dextromethorphan, or DXM. Whether in capsule or liquid form, cough and cold medicines can be abused to get high if taken in large doses or outside of the guidelines of use. DXM may cause the user to experience hallucinations, paranoia, nausea and vomiting, confusion, lack of coordination, increased heartbeat, high blood pressure and even the inability to speak or move for some users. DXM medications include any cold medicine with “DM” or “TUSS” in its name, such as Mucinex DM and Robitussin. Some slang terms to be aware of that reference abusing OTC medications include Dex or Dexing, Robo-tripping, Skittles, Orange Crush, Vitamin D, Triple C’s or CCCs, Tussin, and Red Hots. For a list of products containing DXM and information about how to address this issue with your teen, look for the “PARENT” label on OTC medications and visit www.StopMedicineAbuse.org.

Medications containing Dextromethorphan are not the only OTC medication that are being abused by teen. Thus, it is important to keep track of the ingredients contained

in the medications you are purchasing, and their potential for misuse. Be sure to watch for antihistamines, such as Benadryl, and dimenhydrinate, such as Dramamine . Although seemingly harmless, these OTC medications will produce similar effects to medicine containing DXM and are often staples in the family medicine cabinet, making them easily accessible to teenagers.

If you are now wondering how to protect your teens from these dangers, here are some tips:

- First, do not be casual about using OTC medications or prescription drugs by modeling responsible use. When you can, lock them up
- Monitor your medications. Keep a running inventory of your medicine cabinet by knowing how many pills you have in each bottle and number of remaining doses of over-the-counter tablets and liquid.
- If your teen takes medications, keep track of those as well, make them accountable for their medications by setting clear boundaries and guidelines around taking them.
- Educate your teen about the dangers of prescription drug misuse, overdose and poisoning, and be sure to convey that sharing medications with friends is illegal and dangerous.
- Do your best to keep unneeded, unused, and expired medications out of your home and dispose of them properly. Every medication is different and even an expired medication can be harmful, and in some cases even more potent than it would normally be. Contact your local police department about disposing your medications at their permanent prescription drug drop box, how to participate in Drug Take Back Day events, or learn in-home disposal techniques.

For more information about prescription medications, over-the-counter drugs, or about any other substances, visit:

- National Institute of Drug Abuse: www.drugabuse.gov
- Above the Influence: www.abovetheinfluence.com
- Partnership For Drug-Free Kids: www.drugfree.org or www.drugfreenh.org

Stay tuned for Part 2 of this article! We will be discussing other dangers within the home including harmful inhalants and aerosols.

Youth on Track is a column dedicated to youth substance misuse prevention and education in our community and is brought to you by the Haverhill Area Substance Misuse Prevention Coalition (HASMPC). Mariah Coulstring is the Drug-Free Communities (DFC) Program Coordinator for HASMPC and employee of the North Country Health Consortium (NCHC) in Littleton, NH, the hub of the regional public health network that also serves as the fiscal agent for HASMPC. Please visit us on Facebook by searching [@HASMPC](#) and contact me with questions, comments, or suggestions for topics at: mcoulstring@nchcnh.org or call (603) 259-3700 X251.