

# PRESCRIPTIONS

## THE ISSUE

The non-medical use of prescription drugs is a serious public health issue. Prescription drug misuse is the intentional or unintentional use of medication without a prescription, in a way other than prescribed, or for the experience or feeling it causes (even if for a legitimate medical complaint such as pain). Behind alcohol and marijuana, prescriptions are the most commonly abused drugs in the United States, contributing to a growing national problem. A combination of increased availability and misconceptions about prescription drug safety have contributed to this issue. In turn, prescription drug misuse has led to increased emergency room visits, prescription drug overdose deaths, and treatment admissions for prescription drug use disorders, including addiction.

## TYPES OF PRESCRIPTION DRUGS

According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, the most commonly abused classes of prescription drugs are:

### OPIOIDS

- Prescribed to treat pain
- Examples: codeine, hydrocodone (Vicodin), oxycodone (OxyContin and Percocet), and morphine (Kadian and Avinza)

### CENTRAL NERVOUS SYSTEM (CNS) DEPRESSANTS

- Prescribed to treat anxiety and sleep disorders
- Examples: barbiturates (Mebaral and Nembutal) and benzodiazepines (Valium and Xanax)

### STIMULANTS

- Prescribed to treat ADHD, narcolepsy
- Examples: dextroamphetamine (Dexedrine and Adderall) and methylphenidate (Ritalin and Concerta)

## OPIOIDS

Opioids have been used for centuries to treat pain, cough, and diarrhea. Chemically, these medications are very similar to heroin, leading to an increased risk of addiction and overdose even in patients who take their medication as prescribed. Opioids can also produce drowsiness, mental confusion, nausea, constipation, and respiratory depression. Even a single large dose of an opioid can cause severe respiratory depression (slowing or stopping of breathing), which can be fatal; taking opioids with alcohol or sedatives increases this risk.

## CNS DEPRESSANTS

CNS depressants are substances that can slow brain activity. Continued use can lead to dependence and withdrawal when use is abruptly reduced or stopped. Someone who is thinking about discontinuing a sedative or who is suffering withdrawal from CNS depressants should speak with a physician or seek immediate medical treatment. Concurrent use of alcohol or other depressants with Valium or Xanax can be life-threatening.

## STIMULANTS

Stimulants increase alertness, attention, and energy, as well as elevate blood pressure, heart rate, and respiration. Historically, stimulants were used to treat asthma and other respiratory problems, obesity, neurological disorders, and a variety of other ailments. But as their potential for misuse and addiction became apparent, the number of conditions treated with stimulants has decreased. Withdrawal symptoms associated with discontinuing stimulant use include fatigue, depression, and disturbed sleep patterns. Some people take these drugs in the absence of medical need in an effort to enhance mental performance. Nonmedical use of stimulants for cognitive enhancement poses potential health risks, including addiction, cardiovascular events, and psychosis.



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