



Patient education: Prescription drug misuse (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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What is prescription drug misuse?

"Prescription drug misuse" means using prescription medicines in ways that are different from how they are meant to be taken. People sometimes also call this "prescription drug abuse."

Prescription drug misuse can have a bad impact on important parts of a person's life. For example, it might cause the person to miss work or school, or have problems getting along with friends or family.

People who misuse prescription drugs might:

- Take drugs that are not prescribed to them
- Take more of the drug than what the label says
- Crush pills and inhale them, or inject them into a vein, instead of swallowing them as directed

What are the most commonly misused prescription drugs?

The types of prescription drugs that people misuse most often are ([table 1](#)):

- Certain drugs to treat severe pain (called "opioids")
- Drugs that make you feel alert and focused (called "stimulants")
- Drugs that make you feel calm, relaxed, or possibly sleepy (called "anxiolytics")

What are common signs that a person might be misusing prescription drugs?

Warning signs of prescription drug misuse include:

- Sudden changes in mood or behavior
- Being more irritable than normal
- Being more sleepy than normal

People who misuse prescription drugs might tell their doctor that they need more medicine than they actually do. That way, they can get more of the drug they are misusing. They might also try to get the same prescription medicine from more than 1 doctor. Some people order drugs on the internet, too.

But most people who misuse prescription drugs get them from a friend or relative, not a doctor.

Prescription drug misuse is common among teens. Often, teens take drugs from their parents' medicine cabinet. Other times, they get the drugs from other teens.

Should I see a doctor or nurse?

If you are worried that you have a problem with drugs, talk to your doctor, nurse, or a mental health counselor. They can recommend treatments to help you.

If you think that someone close to you is misusing prescription drugs, ask them if they are taking medicines differently from how they are meant to be taken. If they are, encourage them to speak to the doctor who prescribed the drugs. You can also ask your own doctor or counselor for advice.

If you think that your child is misusing prescription drugs, talk to their doctor.

How is prescription drug misuse treated?

A major treatment for prescription drug misuse is counseling. In counseling, you talk with a doctor or other specialist about how to stop misusing drugs. There are medicines that can help treat addiction to some prescription drugs.

Other treatments can include:

- Prescription medicines that make it easier to stop misusing drugs. Medicines like these are available only for some types of drug misuse.
 - Support groups, such as Narcotics Anonymous. In support groups, people talk about their drug use and share advice on how to quit.
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What is withdrawal?

When people take drugs for a long time and suddenly stop or reduce the dose sharply, they often get symptoms. These symptoms are called "withdrawal," and might include:

- Feeling anxious or restless
- Trouble sleeping
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea

If you have any of these symptoms after stopping a drug, talk with your doctor or nurse. They can prescribe medicines to treat these symptoms or suggest ways to help you cope. Medicines can prevent more severe symptoms, such as seizures.

What can I do to prevent someone from dying of a drug overdose?

If you think that someone might be having a drug overdose, **call for an ambulance** (in the US and Canada, **call 9-1-1**).

There is a medicine called "[naloxone](#)" that can treat people who overdose on opioids. (Opioids include heroin, [morphine](#), and certain prescription pain medicines.) Signs of an opioid overdose include extreme sleepiness, slow breathing or no breathing, slow heartbeat, and very small pupils. If you or someone in your house misuses opioids or is trying to stop using them, you might want to keep naloxone at home. Naloxone comes in a shot, or as a spray that goes into the nose (sample brand name: Narcan nasal spray). Some brands of the nasal spray are available without a prescription.

[Naloxone](#) only works for opioid overdose. It will **not** help a person who has overdosed on a different drug.

Can prescription drug misuse be prevented?

There are things you can do to use your medicine safely and help protect yourself and others:

- Tell your doctor about all of the medicines you take, including over-the-counter medicines.
- Take medicine only as prescribed.
- Read the instructions from the pharmacist before taking your medicine.
- Ask your doctor or pharmacist about your medicine if you are unsure about how it will affect you.
- Store medicines in a safe place, such as a locked cabinet. This prevents other people from getting to them.
- Once your health problem is better, get rid of any leftover pills that were prescribed to treat the problem. This might involve flushing them down the toilet, or mixing them with something like dirt or cat litter before putting the mixture in the trash. Some police stations and pharmacies also take unused or leftover medicines.

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