



What is prescription drug abuse



The dangers



Most commonly abused classes of drugs



Opioids



Stimulants



Depressants



Antidepressants



Five most commonly abused medications



Ritalin



Percocet



Vicodin



Demerol



OxyContin



The signs



How to have a successful intervention



Withdrawal



Detox



Overcoming addiction/aftercare



Finding hope in the future

# What is Prescription Drug Abuse?

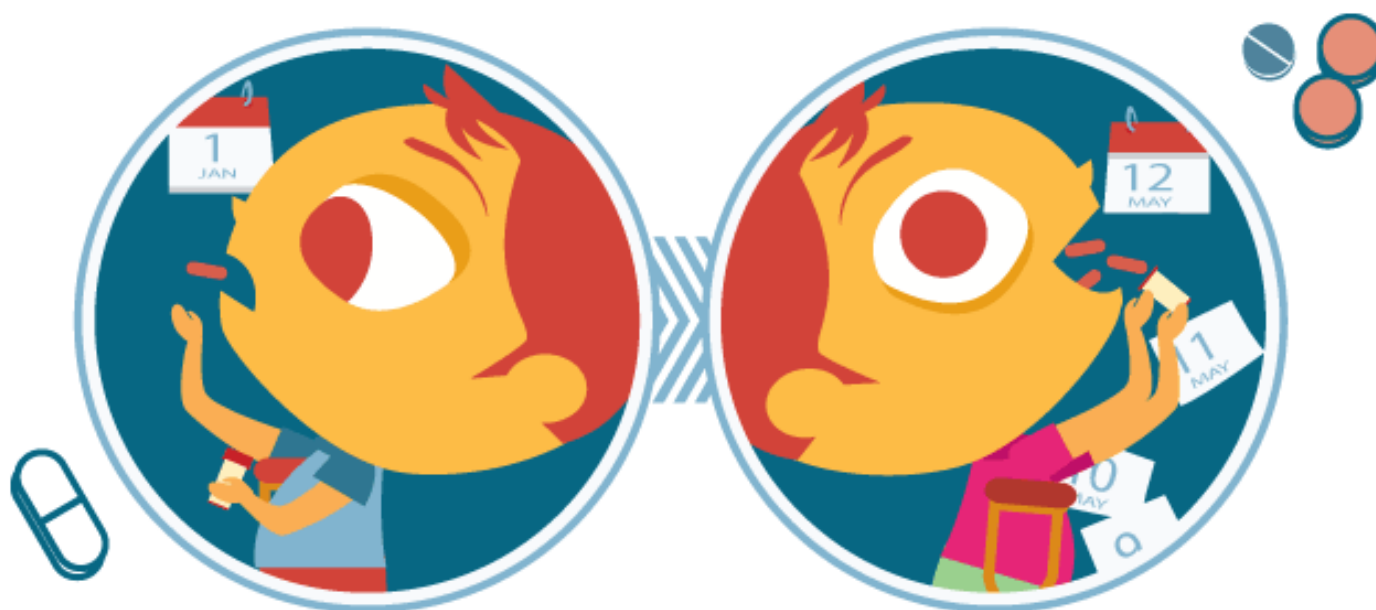
Prescription drug abuse is a growing problem faced by millions of Americans. Many prescription drug abusers develop their addiction when they are initially prescribed medication for pain. A doctor may prescribe drugs such as Percocet, Vicodin or OxyContin following an operation in order to help manage chronic pain, or if a patient suffers an accidental injury. While taking this medication, some individuals develop a physical and psychological dependency. When their original prescription runs out, they seek more. Experimenting with pills on the street or at parties with friends may also lead many younger adults to addiction.

If someone you love is struggling with a prescription drug addiction, you are not alone. According to the Drug Enforcement Agency, 7 million Americans abuse prescription drugs each year. Physical dependence, accompanied by psychological dependence, leads to addiction. Some addicts may also combine prescription drugs with alcohol, crush time-release pills, or snort the drugs for an intensified rush and immediate hit. Combining medications with other drugs or crushing drugs for a faster rush are signs of addiction.



## What are the Dangers of Prescription Drug Abuse?

Prescription drug abuse is characterized by psychological and physical dependency. Individuals who are addicted develop tolerance to the drug they are abusing. This means that addicts need increasingly greater amounts of the drug to achieve the same euphoric high. This is especially true for opiate-based prescription painkillers. Initially, a user may only need one or two pills to achieve the desired feelings of euphoria. Over time, however, addicts may start taking several pills at once in order to experience any sensation.



Tolerance is one reason why prescription drug abuse is so dangerous. Taking multiple pills at once can easily lead to overdose. Unfortunately, many individuals who are addicted to prescription drugs mistakenly believe that these drugs are “safer” than street drugs like crack cocaine and heroin.. However, the fact that prescription drugs are available legally does not make them any safer. The risk for overdose is just as great when abusing prescription painkillers as when abusing any other drug. Due to their highly-addictive qualities and potential for overdose, the Federal Drug Administration has classified prescription drugs like Ritalin, OxyContin and Demerol in the same category as opium and cocaine.

## What are the Dangers of Prescription Drug Abuse?

Prescription drug abuse is responsible for the majority of drug overdose deaths each year. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), overdose deaths from opioid painkillers (e.g. Percocet and OxyCotin) are part of a nationwide drug epidemic. Prescription painkiller overdoses have now surpassed heroin and cocaine as the leading cause for drug overdose deaths. The American Society of Interventional Pain Physicians reports that approximately 120,000 Americans visit the emergency room each year after overdosing on opioid painkillers.

Unfortunately, many teenagers and adults alike continue to believe that prescription drugs are much safer than illegal street drugs. This can lead to dangerous patterns of drug abuse resulting in overdose and even death. Many celebrities have died from accidental prescription drug overdose. Screen icon Marilyn Monroe died from “acute barbiturate poisoning” caused by sleeping pill abuse. Rock ‘n roll icon Elvis Presley battled an addiction to stimulants and prescription drugs for decades before dying from an overdose. Model Anna Nicole Smith died from a combination of sleeping pills, opioid painkillers and anti-anxiety medications. Actor Heath Ledger passed away following accidental death from a cocktail of prescription painkillers including OxyContin, Valium, Xanax and Vicodin.



# What are the Most Commonly Abused Prescription Drugs?

Prescription drugs fall into one of four different categories:



Opioids: Also known as prescription painkillers, these drugs contain opium or opium-derivatives (e.g., Vicodin, Percocet)



Stimulants: Medications that increase energy levels and alertness (e.g., Ritalin) but also increase heart rate, respiration rate and blood pressure



Depressants: Central nervous system depressants that slow brain function; includes sedatives (e.g., Valium) and tranquilizers.



Antidepressants: Psychiatric drugs that alleviate depression; abuse can cause paranoia, hallucinations and psychosis (e.g. Prozac, Zoloft)

## Five most commonly abused medications

The following is a list of five commonly abused prescription drugs. Individuals may be given a prescription for these medications from a doctor and then develop a psychological and physical dependency. Other addicts may start using these drugs to intensify a high while partying. Either way, once an addiction to these drugs develops, it can be extremely difficult to break.

### Vicodin



An opiate painkiller abused for its euphoric high; intense withdrawal symptoms lead to daily dependency

### OxyContin



This time-release prescription painkiller is crush, snorted or injected for an instant high; also known as "Hillbilly Heroin"

### Percocet



A highly addictive opiate, Percocet has been linked to heart failure following prolonged abuse

## Five most commonly abused medications

### Demerol



This addictive opiate inhibits pain, but is also accompanied by intense withdrawal symptoms including chills, fever and suicidal thoughts

### Ritalin



Prescribed to help children and teens manage Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Ritalin is frequently abused by college students to stay away all night studying; many use it as a readily-available substitute for cocaine



## What are the Signs of Prescription Drug Addiction?

Many prescription drug addicts become experts at hiding their addiction from the world. Since prescription drugs are legal, addicts are able to access their drug of choice with minimal difficulty. Many addicts are successful professionals who become adept at hiding their addiction even from loved ones, friends and coworkers.



Since prescription drug addicts rarely admit they have a problem, it is essential that family and friends not ignore the warning signs of addiction. For example, addiction to opiate medications including Vicodin and OxyContin can cause periods of euphoric behavior followed by irritability, mood swings and anxiety. Withdrawal from friends and family, along with lying or suspicious behavior suggests that the addict is trying to keep his addiction hidden from others. Many addicts begin "doctor shopping" and faking illnesses in an effort to procure as many prescription painkillers as possible.



## What are the Signs of Prescription Drug Addiction?



Euphoric behavior followed by irritability and mood swings.



Chills or fever.



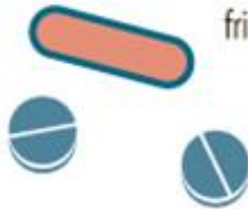
Withdrawal from friend and family.



Doctor shopping for multiple prescriptions.



Stealing money to support the drug habit.



## Prescription Drug Addiction: Staging a Successful Intervention

If someone you love is struggling with prescription drug addiction, confronting them about this addiction can be a challenging and emotional experience. Staging a successful intervention, however, is essential to getting your loved one the treatment he or she desperately needs. If possible, try to have this conversation when they are sober or not using. They will be less defensive and more open to listening to what you have to say and admitting their problem.

Since prescription drugs are legal, staging a successful intervention can be a challenge. Even if an addict is “doctor shopping” or engaging in other unethical behaviors to obtain the medication, addicts do not believe they have a problem. Nagging, preaching or crying will not work with addicts. An addict will try to blame everyone but himself for what is happening. Tell them that excusing or denying their behavior will not work and express concern for their addiction, but do not make excuses for their behavior. Encourage your loved one to accept responsibility for his addiction and to seek treatment from a drug addiction specialist.



## Prescription Drug Withdrawal Symptoms

Addictive prescription drugs are typically an opiate-based medicine that affects the nervous system. While drugs like Percocet and Vicodin can provide much-needed pain relief following an operation or accident, they can be also psychologically habit forming. Without medication, individuals experience pain or happiness thanks to neurotransmitters in the brain. These chemicals hop between different nerve endings, allowing individuals to experience both pain and pleasure.

Opiate medications work by blocking the transmission and reception of pain signals. Individuals who are dependent on prescription painkillers like OxyCotin and Vicodin may experience withdrawal symptoms similar to morphine addiction.

These symptoms include:



Cold shakes.



Chills and sweating.



Fever-like symptoms.



Mood swings.



Anxiety and depression.



Bone pain.



Vomiting.



Insomnia.



Diarrhea.

## Prescription Drug Detox

Prescription drug detox is the medically supervised process of cleansing the body from the harmful effects of drug dependency. After admitting a problem and seeking help, successful detox is the next step for addicts on the road to recovery. Overcoming withdrawal symptoms can be a tremendous challenge. Prescription drug addicts are both physically and psychologically addicted to their drug of choice, which means simply quitting “cold turkey” is not recommended. Without proper treatment and supervision, relapse rates for prescription drug abuse are extremely high. Sheer will power alone is not enough to overcome prescription drug addiction.

Prescription drug abusers should not try to detox on their own. Medically-assisted detox can help addicts safely manage withdrawal symptoms. In some cases, a methadone maintenance program may be helpful for managing opioid withdrawal symptoms. Careful monitoring by medical professionals ensures detox is a successful process. Starting sobriety with 24-hour support and medical assistance gives many addicts the confidence boost they need to truly commit to living a sober lifestyle.



## Overcoming Prescription Drug Addiction and Aftercare



After successfully completing a residential rehab program, recovery addicts should participate in a prescription drug aftercare program. Aftercare is designed to ease the transition from residential rehab to sober living in a drug-free world. Some residential rehab facilities offer work-exchange rehab programs. These aftercare programs allow patients who have completed rehab to remain in the residential facility in exchange for basic help around the program. Recovering addicts may also meet with new patients to provide mentoring and guidance. This sober living is helpful for recovering addicts who have completed rehab but are not ready to make the transition to outpatient care.

After leaving rehab, many former addicts benefit from continued counseling and group therapy with individuals who are also in recovery. This supportive environment is a safe place for addicts to discuss their challenges with individuals who have also faced the same problems. Aftercare programs keep patients engaged in the recovery process and accountable for their actions.

Some recovering patients may choose to attend Narcotics Anonymous meetings. These regular meetings provide ongoing support while also holding patients accountable. Most importantly, the meetings create a predictable weekly routine, which is essential to helping former addicts transition to a positive, drug-free lifestyle.

## Finding Hope in the Future

If you or someone you love is struggling with prescription drug addiction, it's natural to feel overwhelmed and lost. The future may seem very bleak, especially if your loved one has already tried unsuccessfully to kick their addiction in the past. Unfortunately, rehabilitation programs are not always successful the first time. Your loved one may need a longer stay at a residential treatment program to truly overcome his or her addiction.

Many celebrities have successfully overcome their addictions to lead full, productive lives. 'Friends' star Matthew Perry, conservative radio personality Rush Limbaugh, singer Courtney Love, and actor Robert Downey Jr. have all admitted to abusing prescription drugs. Some stars, including Nicole Richie, have been arrested for driving under the influence of prescription drugs. Richie famously entered a freeway on ramp driving the wrong direction. Thanks to rehab programs, these stars overcame their prescription drug addiction. Your loved one can, too.

Do not give up hope. Recovering from prescription drug addiction is a long process that will include setbacks. Relapse does not mean failure. It simply means that your loved one needs additional assistance staying on track with a sober lifestyle. Your support is essential to helping your loved one get the help he or she needs. No matter what challenges are ahead for your loved one, living a prescription-drug free life is possible.

