

THE DEVASTATING IMPACT OF PRESCRIPTION DRUG ABUSE HITS HOME



YOUNG PEOPLE AMONG TOP RX DRUG ABUSERS

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Prescription drug abuse-related deaths have made national headlines in recent years – particularly in deaths involving celebrities, such as Heath Ledger, who died in 2008 from a drug overdose.

But celebrities are not the only ones to abuse prescription drugs and pay the ultimate price. In fact, young people abuse prescription drugs far more than any other age demographic, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA).

And it isn't only the abusers who are impacted by this trend.

The death of 2011 MTHS graduate Forest Jackson on March 29 shocked the community. Police said Jackson was fatally stabbed after trying to stop his friend, suspect and former MTHS student Toby Saucedo, from taking Xanax, an anti-anxiety prescription medication. Saucedo has pending murder and voyeurism charges.

Abuse on the Rise

"There's been a definitive rise in the abuse of prescription drugs, especially in teenagers," Mountlake Terrace Police Department (MTPD) Detective Mike Haynes said.

In 2010, 3,000 young Americans died from prescription drug overdoses. The NIDA reports this is a 250 percent increase from just a decade ago. The NIDA also reports that 5.1 million Americans abused painkillers in 2010. Tranquilizers and stimulants are also abused frequently, according to NIDA reports.

Teens are most likely to abuse painkillers, such as OxyContin and Vicodin, according to Hari Sajja, a pharmacist at Family Pharmacy in Edmonds.

Sajja said as tougher controls are placed on the drugs most commonly abused, teens are turning to different prescription drugs to use.

"They keep finding new things in the recent times, because [painkillers such as Vicodin and OxyContin] are controlled very tightly and now they are trying to come to non-controlled medications, such as Gabapentin and Tramadol, so that is also an issue," Sajja said.

Denver Hanson, an adolescent case manager at Lakeside Milam Recovery Center in Edmonds, said teens are also abusing Adderall and other drugs that they may have been prescribed by exceeding the prescribed amount.

Although prescription drug overdose-related deaths have increased in the past decade, Sajja said some federal programs are lowering the rate of abuse.

Sajja highlighted the Prescription Drug Monitoring Program, or PMP, a national database through which doctors and pharmacists can monitor and track every time a person purchases prescription medication.

Not every state has adopted the program, but Sajja said states that participate, such as Washington, are seeing significant improvement.

"Right now with the PMP, it's actually [getting better]. With that in place, it's getting difficult to obtain the medi-

cations. At least that is solving a lot of problems, so only the genuine patients can get the prescriptions," Sajja said.

The ability to access that kind of information is allowing pharmacists and doctors to see patients' habits.

Sajja said it has enabled them to see if people are "doctor shopping," the practice of traveling from doctor to doctor or pharmacy to pharmacy to improperly seek additional medications.

With the PMP in place, Sajja said pharmacists and doctors are now able to easily see red flags of prescription drug abuse. Frequent abusers often have multiple doctors, multiple pharmacies and attempt to refill their medications earlier than what their doctors have instructed.

Sajja said his pharmacy actually turns away customers who frequent multiple doctors and multiple pharmacies. He said turning away "doctor shoppers" is a growing practice among pharmacies, depending on the company.

For school counselors, like student advocate Ashley Johnson, the prescription drug abuse problem can be hidden and hard to detect.

"We don't hear about [prescription drug abuse] as much as we hear about marijuana and alcohol and tobacco, but it definitely is an issue for sure, a growing issue," Johnson said. "I would say it's most likely there are people using that we don't know about yet."

Easy access and the 'cool' factor

More than any other demographic, young adults abuse drugs most frequently, according to the NIDA.

The NIDA reports that 7 percent of 12-17-year-olds will use prescription drugs non-medically and 13 percent of 25-28-year-olds will use them non-medically, compared to just 4 percent of persons 26 and older.

Counselors and pharmacists say the reasons why teens abuse so frequently are varied. However, the most common reason is clear: easy access.

Parents and grandparents are often prescribed strong pain medication after having surgery or other legitimate medical needs. Hanson said once parents and grandparents have stopped using their painkillers, they often forget about them and leave them in their medicine cabinets, adding that kids taking prescription drugs can often go undetected.

Sajja attributed the experimental nature of young people and their easy access to powerful drugs as factors that lead young people to abuse the most frequently.

"They are in the age range where they want to try things. The second thing is the parents or the grandparents may have pain medications and kids may have access, easy access probably, to them," he said.

Hanson also attributed the abuse of prescription drugs to its glamorization in pop-culture.

"For a while Eminem would rap about taking Vicodin and drinking beer and it became a social norm, an okay thing to be doing," he said.

Eminem's "Underground" mentions his use of Vicodin, OxyContin and Xanax, along with alcohol.

Hanson said teens often simultaneously use prescription drugs and alcohol to get an increased effect.

"A lot of times opiates and pills are taken with alcohol, which amplifies the effects of the opiates, especially prescription medication."

Denver Hanson
LAKESIDE MILAM RECOVERY CENTER
(EDMONDS) ADOLESCENT CASE MANAGER