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

Abuse of prescription drugs has also been attributed to the culture of peer pressure that exists predominately among young adults and teens.

“I worry about this peer culture that it’s tattling or snitching on someone when someone could be really hurt and going on that path of addiction can be really dark and really fast,” MTHS psychologist Julie Schwab said. “I think it’s a hidden problem in our community that I think there’s often a silence among peers instead of seeking support or reaching out to say, ‘I’m worried about my friend.’ I think it’s been there and it continues to be there. It’s difficult to track because of the peer culture.”

Hanson said students may be reluctant to speak up out of fear of being labeled a “snitch.”

“I think that the word snitch needs to be taken out of the vocabulary,” he said. “I’m a firm believer in there’s no such thing as a ‘snitch’ A lot of times young adults, and especially kids that I work with tell me, ‘I can’t be a snitch’ or ‘I’m not going to be a snitch’ and again that is something that they hear about. It’s a learned behavior.”

Serious side effects

Due to the medical nature of prescription drugs, some teens feel as if prescription drugs are safe.

Schwab said teens often have misconceptions about the safety of prescription drugs.

“Often I hear from students that they feel prescription drugs are safer because they come from a pharmacy and therefore, it’s not on some street corner, it’s in their house,” she said

NIDA reported that 35 percent of teens who used prescription drugs said they did so because they felt prescription drugs are safer than illegal drugs, such as heroin or methamphetamines.

However, Sajja said that when abused, prescription drugs can be extremely dangerous to a person’s health.

Sajja said Vicodin is a revealing example of the health risks of prescription drug abuse. Sajja said the federal government mandated Vicodin to be a mixture of hydrocodone and Tylenol to reduce abuse of the drug.

However, Sajja said many have abused Vicodin, taking in excessive amounts of Tylenol. When Tylenol is consumed in excess, it can result in severe liver damage.

“They want to get the hydrocodone but they end up getting more and more Tylenol and thus liver damage and then they end up in the emergency room. That is the problem actually,” Sajja said.

ABUSE of Prescription (Rx) Drugs in Young Adults


CONSEQUENCES

IN 2010, **3,000** YOUNG ADULTS DIED FROM PRESCRIPTION (RX) DRUG OVERDOSES, THAT’S

8 DEATHS PER DAY 

FOR EVERY DEATH DUE TO RX DRUG OVERDOSE, THERE WERE:

17  **TREATMENT ADMISSIONS** 

 **66** **EMERGENCY ROOM VISITS**

MOTIVATIONS

dealwithproblems relieve pain
 experiment **concentrate**
study feelbetter **relax** get high
 increase alertness haveagoodtimewithfriends

He said prescription drugs can also cause other serious medical problems, such as respiratory failure.

Taken in appropriate amounts for legitimate purposes, Sajja said prescription drugs are essential.

"You cannot prevent the use of these drugs, because they save lives," he said. "If someone has surgery, they need the pain relievers. They are lifesavers.

But when used non-medically, Sajja said the drugs may have serious effects that can result in serious medical complications.

The NIDA reports that abuse of prescription drugs can result in seizures, comas, respiratory failure or even death.

Others worry about addiction early in life leading to a lifetime of addiction.

"There's not an understanding of the path toward addiction," Schwab said, pointing out that occasional use can turn into severe chemical dependence.

Like marijuana, prescription drugs have been called "gateway drugs," or introductory drugs that may lead to abuse of even harsher narcotics.

Det. Haynes said in his experience, teens who used prescription drugs in their high school years often turned to harder narcotics, particularly heroin, leading to more crime later in life.

"The truth is that people get addicted and then they have difficulty paying [for drugs] so they spend a lot of time trying to find ways to support their habit, and ultimately they resort to committing crimes, whether that's robbery or burglary or what have you. I would say that in my opinion crime occurs because of the drugs," Haynes said.

Limiting abuse

With the dangers and risks of prescription drug abuse incredibly high, experts agree parents must implement safeguards to reduce the risk of abuse.

Sajja said medications should be stored under "lock and key."

Locked cabinets are recommended for prescription medications that could potentially be abused.

Also, prescription medications should be disposed of after they are no longer needed.

Hanson said prescription medications should not be simply flushed down the toilet.

He recommends several options. Hanson said pharmacies will dispose of

any drug correctly.

A "do-it-yourself" solution he recommends is to place prescription drugs into a plastic bag with coffee grounds and water. Then, seal the bag and throw it in the trash. He said the combination will deactivate the potency of the drugs.

Helpful resources exist

When students are caught at school with drugs, Johnson said they are emergency-expelled for 30 days, but can return in just five if they receive an evaluation and comply with the recommendation for treatment.

Students expelled or suspended are often sent to receive treatment at Lakeside Milam, where Hanson works with teens to help them overcome their addictions.

Hanson said Lakeside Milam offers a variety of services, including inpatient and outpatient programs.

With the more severe cases, Hanson said the inpatient program works to provide information for substance abusing teens.

"Sometimes adolescents need to be taken out of their regular environment, away from their friends, away from their cell phone, away from their drug dealers or whatever that is and put them in a safe place for 35 days in order for them to get inundated with education and information about substance use and abuse and dependence so they're able to make a different decision," he said.

With the outpatient program, Hanson said it's important to not only educate teens, but also to show them you can have fun without being high.

"Some people think 'I can't have fun without using drugs,' so laughing and enjoying being clean and sober is important," he said.

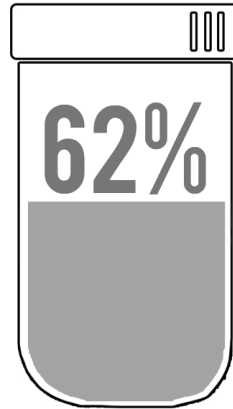
Schwab said she encourages students who struggle with addiction or are concerned about a friend or relative to speak confidentially with the many staff members available.

"There are resources within our school counselors, our social worker and our school psychologist to have a confidential conversation and share your concern," she said. ☐

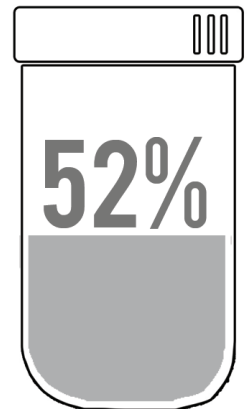
"There's not an understanding of the path toward addiction."

Julie Schwab
MTHS PSYCHOLOGIST

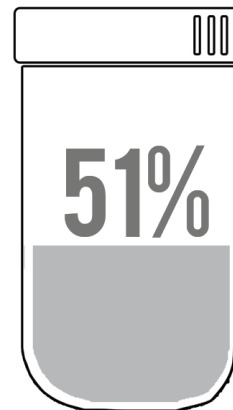
Why Teens Use PRESCRIPTION DRUGS



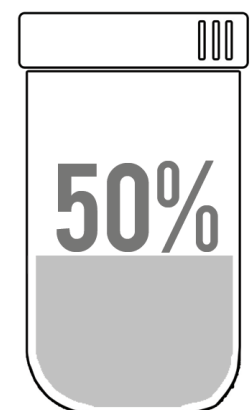
Easy to get from parent's medicine cabinets



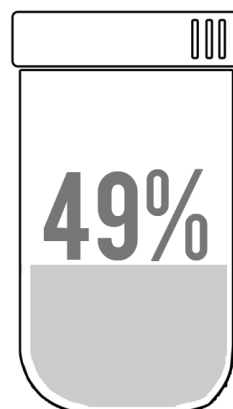
Available Everywhere



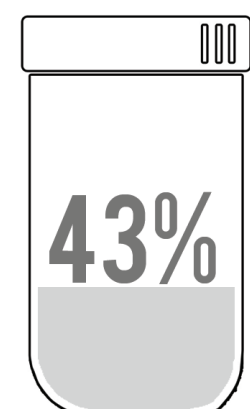
Aren't illegal drugs



Easy to get through other's prescriptions



Can claim to have prescription if caught



They are cheap

Above: Statistics gathered from 2006 University of Texas study "Trends in the Abuse of Prescription Drugs."
Opposite page: statistics gathered from the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

NOTE: Hawkeye reporter Stephi Smith contributed to this report.