

Prescription Drugs Abuse: Household Medicine Cabinets can be a Gateway to Addiction

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In recent years, prescription drugs have brought the dangers of addiction and overdose closer to home than most Americans probably realize. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the most commonly abused drugs in the United States, after marijuana, are prescribed medications⁷. In 2017, an estimated 18 million Americans (aged 12 and older) reported taking prescription drugs for nonmedical reasons at least once¹.

The purpose may have ranged from getting high, losing weight, or [improving focus](#). Regardless of the reason that prescription drugs are taken illicitly, users face the same risks associated with illegal “street” drugs: addiction and overdose.

What Does this Mean?

There’s an alarming corollary to this increase in prescription drug abuse; namely, an increase in accidental overdoses. This is demonstrated by the number of deaths involving

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prescription drugs, primarily driving the increase in prescription narcotics, which has been increasing steadily since 2014, primarily driven by the increase in the use of [opioids](#). [24/7 Detox & Treatment Help \(938\) 666-1632](tel:(938)666-1632)

The most common classes of prescription drugs responsible for this recent misuse epidemic are opioids, CNS depressants, and stimulants⁵.

Opioids and Prescription Drugs Abuse

Opioids are commonly prescribed. They are used to treat severe and chronic pain. When used as directed, they are extremely effective painkillers. [Opioid](#) prescriptions have been on the rise since the 1990s as doctors confront the aging population of Baby Boomers³.

When abused, however, recreational and long-term use of opioids poses several risks; akin to illegal opioids like [heroin](#). They have a high potential for addiction and accidental overdose. Furthermore, when combined with CNS depressants, such as alcohol, the depressive effect on the body is enhanced, and coma or death may result⁵.

Examples of the most abused prescription opioids include²:

- Oxycodone
- Hydrocodone
- Hydromorphone
- Methadone
- Morphine
- Codeine

CNS Depressants and Prescription Drugs Abuse

Depressants (also called tranquilizers, sedatives, and hypnotics) can help treat patients who suffer from insomnia or anxiety⁵.

For example, Valium and [Xanax](#) are two commonly prescribed examples of a class of depressant known as benzodiazepines. This class of drug is thought to depress the central nervous system by enhancing the neurotransmitter known as gamma-aminobutyric acid, or GABA⁸. When present in the brain or spinal cord, GABA suppresses the activity of nerve cells. An over-active nervous system is thought to cause anxiety and restlessness and thus enhancing GABA provides a relieving, calming effect to those who need it⁵.

When this prescription drug is abused — especially in combination with alcohol — depressants can cause serious adverse effects such as respiratory depression and/or coma. Unfortunately, once dependent on a drug like Xanax, users often keep using it to avoid withdrawal symptoms of increased anxiety, insomnia, as well as physical symptoms akin to withdrawing from other depressants⁸.

In addition to benzodiazepines, there are non-benzodiazepine drugs used for insomnia; namely zolpidem, eszopiclone, and zaleplon. With a precursory glance, they appear more attractive due to a shorter duration of action and less daytime sleepiness. They also have less risk of dependence when compared to benzodiazepines. However, hallucinations and psychosis have been reported with the use of these drugs⁸.

Lastly, barbiturates are a subtype that has been largely replaced by benzodiazepines for anxiety and insomnia. Although withdrawal from benzodiazepines can be unpleasant, it is rarely life-threatening. However, withdrawal from prolonged use of barbiturates can have life-threatening complications. Barbiturates also have a higher overdose potential⁵.

Most abused examples⁵:

- Valium (diazepam)
- Xanax (alprazolam)

- Klonopin / 24/7 Detox & Treatment Help
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Stimulants and Prescription Drugs Abuse

[Prescription stimulants](#), such as amphetamines like Adderall and Ritalin, are used to treat Attention Deficient Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). The increase in alertness and attention helps those diagnosed with ADHD to focus and increase productivity.

Stimulants enhance the effects of monoamine neurotransmitters. This, in turn, increases heart rate and blood sugar as well as opens the pathways of the respiratory system⁵. As such, stimulants are often misused as a way to get high, boost energy, and/or lose weight. Not only are users at risk of addiction due to the surge in neurotransmitter release, but high doses can also pose a danger to vital organs such as the heart, causing an irregular heartbeat and even cardiac arrest. Acute toxicity can also occur, causing psychosis and hallucinations⁴.

The most abused examples⁵:

- Adderall
- Dexedrine
- Ritalin

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