

Generation Rx and the Abuse of Medications in a Drug-Taking Society

A discussion-based activity

This activity is intended for small groups of teens, but it could be adapted for larger groups. Students work through the questions presented in the activity handout (provided with the toolkit), while facilitators interject pertinent information and statistics. However, the most important activity relates to the student participants' personal reflection, interaction with their peers in the workshop, and group discussion.

Procedure: Disseminate the activity handout to all participants. Ask the participants to take a few moments to reflect on each question individually and write down their answers. After self-reflection on the questions, instruct them to discuss the questions in small groups. Finally, conduct a group discussion and ask students to provide input. At this point, additional information/statistics from the facilitator may be interjected as well.

Activity Agenda

1. Introduction of facilitators

2. Student participant introductions

[Note: A maximum of 25 student participants is recommended in order to allow meaningful group discussions.] Ask each participant to introduce him or herself. Instruct the group to pay particular attention to the names of the persons near them, as they will be asked to gather in small groups during the discussion blocks.

3. Facilitator's introductory remarks

The title of this activity relates to a phrase that is being used to describe us, at every age, in America's drug-taking society – "Generation Rx." For example, Greg Critser, in his book entitled *Generation Rx: How Prescription Drugs are Altering American Lives, Minds, and Bodies*¹, contends that each of us lives within a "tribe" in America's "Generation Rx." We have become more and more pharmaceuticalized at every age level. We have come to expect that there is a quick fix for almost any health-related problem. And we are taking prescription and over-the-counter (OTC)² medications at unprecedented rates.

The use of prescription drugs has increased significantly. For example, in 1994 2.1 billion prescription purchases were made in the United States. That number increased to 3.8 billion in 2008, for total sales of over \$234 billion³. Factors influencing this trend include the general aging of the American population, the introduction of a growing number and types of medications, and direct-to-consumer advertising of pharmaceuticals in the U.S.

These phenomena have positive and negative effects. On the positive side, we are able to treat diseases and relieve symptoms in ways that were unheard of in the past. We are living longer, and in some cases with a better quality of life, than ever before. Certain diseases that were once fatal are now becoming chronic conditions. However, on the negative side, we are experiencing an alarming rate of adverse drug events, and the abuse of prescription and OTC drugs is increasing significantly.

1. 2005, New York: Houghton Mifflin Co.

2. It may be helpful to differentiate between those medications that require a prescription and those which do not. The latter may also be referred to as "over-the-counter" or "OTC."

3. Kaiser Family Foundation (www.kff.org)

4. Discussion points

Why would teens abuse prescription and OTC drugs?

Teens may abuse prescription and OTC drugs recreationally to get “high.” They may also use the products to relax or reduce stress. They may use stimulants in order to stay awake or alert (e.g., to study). They may abuse these drugs because they are relatively easy to obtain (e.g., from the family medicine cabinet, friends who have prescriptions for desired medications, and the Internet⁴).

What types of prescription medications are most prone to abuse?⁵

- Opioids – commonly used to treat pain (e.g., OxyContin®, Vicodin®, Percodan®, Dilaudid®)
- Central nervous system depressants – commonly used to treat anxiety and sleep disorders (e.g., Valium®, Xanax®, Nembutal®, Seconal®)
- Stimulants – commonly used to treat sleep disorders (e.g., narcolepsy) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (e.g., Dexedrine®, Adderall®, Ritalin®, Concerta®)

What types of over-the-counter medications are most prone to abuse?

- Students have mentioned pain relievers, sleep aids, diet aids, laxatives, cough and cold preparations, and stimulants (e.g., caffeine).
- Of particular concern is the precipitously rising abuse of dextromethorphan, a cough suppressant found in products like Robitussin®, Vicks 44D®, and Coricidin HBP®. If taken in higher than recommended doses, this drug produces euphoric or hallucinogenic effects. One recent study found that abuse of dextromethorphan by 9-17 year olds increased ten-fold between 1999 and 2004⁶. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) estimates that 3.1 million young people age 12-25 (5.3%) have used non-prescription cough and cold medications to get high at least once in their lifetime; one million have done so in the past year (2008).

What are some possible health consequences of abusing prescription or OTC medications?

Health effects relating to the pharmacological actions or side effects of the drug in the body (e.g., respirator depression, nausea, constipation, addiction, unconsciousness with opioids; irritability, anxiousness, paranoia, addiction, respiratory failure, stroke, seizures, reduced appetite, heart failure for stimulants; lowered blood pressure, confusion, fatigue, addiction, respiratory depression, depression, gastrointestinal disturbances, dizziness, memory loss for depressants).

Besides health concerns, what are some other consequences of abusing prescription or OTC medications?

- Physical harm due to accidents, sexual or physical abuse, organ damage.
- Social/emotional effects involving changes in relationships, depression, isolation, etc.
- Legal effects due to the fact that it is against federal laws to obtain prescription medications without a prescription.

4. This may present an opportunity to discuss the potential dangers in obtaining prescription medications via the Internet. For example, the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (“You’ve Got Drugs!” V: Prescription Drug Pushers on the Internet: 2008 Update) identified 365 web sites offering controlled prescription drugs. Of the sites which sell controlled prescription drugs on the Internet, 85% did not require a prescription. Only two of these 365 sites were certified by U.S. Boards of Pharmacy. Obtaining pharmaceuticals in this manner often circumvents U.S. regulatory control. Medical evaluation is fundamental to rationale drug therapy, and (conservatively) 10% of pharmaceutical products worldwide are known to be counterfeit.

5. See Office of National Drug Control Policy (www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov)

6. Bryner, et al, Dextromethorphan Abuse in Adolescence. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, 2007;160:1217-1222.

Would you consider the abuse of prescription or over-the-counter medications to be a safe alternative to using illicit street drugs?

"The Partnership Attitude Tracking Study (PATS): Teens in Grades 7 Through 12, 2005" reported the following with regard to teen attitudes about prescription medicine abuse:

- 56% agreed strongly or somewhat that prescription drugs are easier to get than illegal drugs.
- 40% agreed strongly or somewhat that prescription drugs, even if they are not prescribed by a doctor, are much safer than illegal drugs.
- 31% agreed strongly or somewhat that there is nothing wrong with using prescription drugs without a doctor's prescription once in a while.
- 29% agreed strongly or somewhat that prescription pain relievers, even if they are not prescribed by a doctor, are not addictive.

How can you use medications safely?

- Take an active role in your medical care.
- Read medicine labels carefully and take only recommended doses as directed.
- Use the same pharmacy when purchasing prescription and over-the-counter medications so that the pharmacist will have a complete record of your drug therapy.
- Use aids (e.g., daily pill boxes) to help you remember to take your medication regularly.
- Store medications in a safe, dry, cool place.
- Be aware that prescription drugs and over-the-counter products can interact in ways that may be harmful (e.g., they may contain similar active ingredients or ingredients that produce a negative interaction). Talk to your pharmacist if you have questions.
- Don't use other people's prescription drugs.
- Don't crush, chew or cut medications unless directed to do so.
- Keep your medications in their original container.
- Turn on a light and read drug labels before taking medications at night.
- Be thoughtful in how you model medication-taking behaviors to children.

Resources

The Generation Rx Initiative website (www.pharmacy.ohio-state.edu/outreach/generation-rx) provides resources for students, teachers and parents relating to medication safety.

The Generation Rx Initiative is a trademark of The Ohio State University College of Pharmacy.

pharmacy.osu.edu/outreach/generation-rx

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