

Teens abusing prescription pills are a growing concern

January 14 2015, by Rachel Ewing



Credit: Jamie, CC BY 2.0.

Parents and physicians still aren't doing enough to address the rise of "pharming," or recreational use and abuse of prescription drugs, among teenagers, according to public health researchers at Drexel University.

"The medicine chest is a [drug](#) dealer that no one ever thinks about," said Renee Turchi, MD, MPH an associate professor at the Drexel University

School of Public Health and College of Medicine and co-author of a recent review article about pharming in the peer-reviewed physicians' journal *Contemporary Pediatrics*.

Prescription drug abuse among teenagers is a growing area of concern for several reasons, according to Turchi and co-author Susan Solecki, a clinical assistant professor in Drexel's College of Nursing and Health Professions. They cite federal data reporting that [prescription medications](#) are the drugs second-most commonly abused by adolescents (after marijuana), and are the drugs with the biggest growth in abuse among those aged 12-24. Abuse of these drugs and of over-the-counter medications has surpassed the use of illicit and illegal drugs such as cocaine and heroin.

Turchi, a pediatrician, learned about pharming from a friend who works in law enforcement, and subsequently enlisted Solecki, who is a [public health](#) doctoral candidate and Turchi's advisee, to work together on the new report to raise awareness of the issue among other health care practitioners.

Teens may perceive prescribed drugs as "safe" or "clean" in comparison to street drugs—when in reality, pills, especially when taken in combination, can have dangerous and even lethal side effects. Turchi and Solecki cite data showing that 14 percent of high school seniors have used [prescription drugs](#) for nonmedical reasons at least once. Also, prescription drug use can be a predecessor to heroin use for teens and young adults.

Some reports even point to a trend in "pharm parties" or "skittling parties" (named for the colorful candy). In these parties, teens combine different pills in a shared bowl and each swallow a few pills indiscriminately—sometimes with an alcohol chaser. Combining medications in this way, and with alcohol, can cause stroke, heart attack,

irreversible brain damage or death.

When teens abuse [prescription pills](#), parents may be unaware because there is no telltale odor, and these pills may not cause slurred speech or other obvious signs of being high.

The Drexel researchers want to send a wake-up call to both parents and physicians to educate teenagers about the risks of prescription pills, and to restrict access to medications at home.

Their main recommendations include:

- Get rid of old prescription drugs in the home; it's not safe to keep them any longer than needed. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency sponsors a National Prescription Drug Take Back Day, and state and municipal authorities provide other options. For example, in Pennsylvania, local police stations have deposit boxes where anyone can drop off unneeded medications for safe disposal.
- Lock medicine chests to keep medications safe if you have to have [prescriptions](#) in a home with teens or where teens may visit.
- Talk to teens about the risks of prescription drug interactions and allergic reactions. Just because it was prescribed by a doctor doesn't mean it's safe for everyone.
- Health care providers should screen for pill-taking behavior when screening adolescents for risk behaviors.
- Health care providers can also talk to parents to be sure they are aware of the risks and keeping medications safe in their home.

Solecki said that the growing availability of prescription pills makes it all the more important to keep those medications safe from improper use.

"We talk about safety of keeping drugs away from toddlers, but

teenagers have access right from the medicine cabinet," she said.

More information: The paper is available online:
[contemporarypediatrics.modernm ... eadly-teens?page=0,0](http://contemporarypediatrics.modernm...eadly-teens?page=0,0)

Provided by Drexel University

Citation: Teens abusing prescription pills are a growing concern (2015, January 14) retrieved 8 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-01-teens-abusing-prescription-pills.html>

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