

Legally high? Teenagers and prescription drug abuse

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Legal drugs such as OxyContin now kill more people than heroin and cocaine combined. While awareness of the dangers of illegal drugs has increased, many teens are still ignorant of the significant physical danger posed by legally prescribed drugs, according to a new study in *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*.

"The CDC has classified the situation as an epidemic," write authors Richard Netemeyer (University of Virginia), Scot Burton (University of Arkansas), Barbara Delaney (Partnership for Drug Free Kids), and Gina Hijjawi (American Institutes for Research). "Prescription drugs are seen as blessed by a trusted institution, the FDA, while increasingly aggressive advertising by drug companies simultaneously floods parents and children with messages that these substances are safe, popular, and beneficial."

The current study recruited teens in shopping malls across the United States, asking them to complete a web-based questionnaire on their use of substances including alcohol, tobacco, and both legal and [illegal drugs](#). They were also asked whether they struggled with anxiety, felt a desire to be popular, sought out exciting activities, and what level of risk they associated with prescription drugs.

On the whole, prescription drug use increased in direct proportion to psychological states such as anxiety, and use of other restricted substances such as alcohol. Under some conditions, however, prescription drug abuse accelerated exponentially, such as when the level

of anxiety or desire to be popular was at its very highest.

"Teens need help before they reach these tipping points for prescription drug abuse. Adults spotting teens with very high levels of anxiety and at least moderate use of other restricted substances should realize that these are students with a high likelihood of prescription drug abuse. Male teens with a high need to be popular and [teens](#) in general appear to be at exceptional risk. Campaigns must target parents as well, since they clearly underestimate both the physical risks of prescription drugs and the likelihood that their children will abuse these drugs," conclude the authors.

More information: Richard Netemeyer, Scot Burton, Barbara Delaney, and Gina Hijjawi. "The Legal High: Factors Affecting Young Consumers' Risk Perceptions and Abuse of Prescription Drugs." Forthcoming in the *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*.

Provided by American Marketing Association

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