

# Addiction to Prescription Medicines

## Prescription Medicines

Medicines legally prescribed by doctors are known as prescription medicines. The misuse of prescription medicines is the most common form of drug abuse among the elderly. It has also become popular among other age groups, especially among adolescents.

There are 3 types of prescription medicines most often abused: opioids (narcotics), central nervous system (CNS) depressants and stimulants.

## Opioids

Opioid pain medicine may help you to have less pain if you have short-term or sudden pain from surgery, injury or illness.

Most prescriptions are for no more than 3 to 5 days so side effects are less likely.

There are many types of opioids, such as morphine, codeine, oxycodone (OxyContin® and Percocet®), hydrocodone (Norco® and Vicodin®) and hydromorphone (Dilaudid®).

**Important:** The longer you take opioid pain medicines the more risk there is of becoming dependent (addicted).

### Potential risks of opioids include:

- Taking an opioid can lead to addiction.
  - More than 2 million Americans abuse opioids.
  - Anyone can become addicted.

- Opioids are highly addictive when used for longer periods of time.
- On average, more than 130 people die each day in the U.S. from an overdose of opioids, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- The longer you take opioids, the more your body gets used to it (known as tolerance), and two things happen:
  - They may not work as well.
  - You may have more side effects when you stop them.
- Taking too many opioids can cause side effects, such as:
  - feeling dizzy, itchy or both
  - making you feel groggy or sleepy
  - feeling sick to your stomach (nausea)
  - vomiting (throwing up)
  - being unable to have a regular bowel movement (constipation)
  - having breathing problems.
- You may be at a higher risk for side effects (including accidental death) if you have sleep apnea, drink alcohol, or if you take a benzodiazepine (sedative) medicine while taking an opioid.

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## CNS Depressants

CNS depressants are used to treat anxiety and sleep disorders. They include:

- barbiturates (to treat anxiety, tension and sleep disorders):
  - mephobarbital (Mebaral®)
  - pentobarbital sodium (Nembutal®)
- benzodiazepines (to treat anxiety, tension and panic attacks, among others):
  - diazepam (Valium®)
  - chlordiazepoxide HCl (Librium®)
  - alprazolam (Xanax®)
  - lorazepam (Ativan®)
  - clonazepam (Klonopin®)
- benzodiazepines (sedating effects for short-term treatment of sleep disorders)
  - triazolam (Halcion®)
  - estazolam (ProSom®).

CNS depressants decrease brain activity and produce a drowsy or calming effect. They make you feel sleepy and uncoordinated. Misuse of CNS depressants can lead to tolerance (you need to take higher doses to get the initial effects) and addiction. You can have withdrawal symptoms when trying to stop. When you do stop, your brain's activity can race out of control, possibly causing seizures or life-threatening complications.

## Stimulants

Stimulants are used to treat narcolepsy (a sleep disorder), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), obesity and depression that does not respond to other treatments. They include:

- dextroamphetamine (Dexedrine®)
- methylphenidate (Ritalin®)
- sibutramine hydrochloride monohydrate (Meridia®)
- Adderall®

Stimulants cause an increase in alertness, attention and energy while increasing blood pressure, and heart and breathing rates. Stimulants may also produce a sense of euphoria. Misuse of stimulants can lead to addiction. Taking high doses over a short time can cause paranoia. High doses may also cause a high body temperature, irregular heartbeat and may lead to heart failure or fatal seizures. These medicines may be taken by mouth or crushed and snorted.

## Addiction

People who abuse prescription medicine get the medicine by “doctor shopping” (visiting many doctors to get many prescriptions) or by changing prescriptions written by a doctor before getting the prescription filled.

Addiction to prescription medicines can be as dangerous as addiction to illegal drugs. Regular misuse can lead to addiction, withdrawal symptoms, heart problems, breathing problems and death. Misused prescription medicines can cause serious side effects when mixed with other medicines.

## Treatment

Treatment for prescription medicine addiction may include the following.

- Cognitive-behavioral therapy helps the user learn coping skills to help break the cycle. This type of therapy teaches the user to recognize the situations in which he or she is most likely to use, how to avoid those situations and how to cope with the problems that go with drug abuse.
- Methadone, a lab-created opiate, is a medicine that blocks the effects of opioids and eliminates withdrawal symptoms for 24 to 36 hours. This is often used if cognitive-behavioral therapy has already been tried.

**Information adapted from the National Institute on Drug Abuse and the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration.**