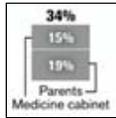


SFGate.com

Parents' prescription drugs pose risk to teens

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Friday, August 15, 2008



(08-14) 19:25 PDT -- Parents who don't safeguard their medications are putting their teenagers at serious risk of addiction to prescription drugs, according to a national survey.

The survey, released Thursday by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, found that parents are dropping the ball on preventing their kids from using drugs, drinking and smoking. Teenagers surveyed said it's easier to buy narcotics than beer. Nearly half the 17-year-olds in the survey said they have at least one friend who abuses prescription drugs.

By overlooking the dangers posed in the medicine cabinet, parents in effect become "passive pushers," said Joseph Califano Jr., chairman and president of the center. The study surveyed 1,002 youths ages 12 to 17 along with more than 300 of their parents between April and June.

The study found that more than a third of the prescription drugs illegally obtained by teens came from their homes.

Evidence of the problem

Health experts not involved in the survey agree that teenagers raiding the family medicine cabinet are a growing problem - many youths quickly become hooked on such powerful opiates as Vicodin and OxyContin. Studies show that opiates trail only marijuana as the most commonly abused class of illegal drugs among adolescents.

While illegal drug use among teenagers has dropped by 25 percent since 2001, the number of teens using Vicodin has not budged, and the number of teens using OxyContin has risen by 25 percent, according to statistics kept by the Office of National Drug Control Policy.

"This has quietly and insidiously grown into a big problem," said Tom Riley, a spokesman for the agency. "It's not a creepy guy in an overcoat pushing drugs - this is about medications that are in your home. Prescription drugs are the drug of choice for teens who are trying drugs for the first time. They are getting drugs from their parents' or their grandparents' medicine cabinets."

Mill Valley physician Howard Kornfeld began to see the upturn several years ago.

"More and more, they are coming in strung out on prescription pill opiates," said Kornfeld, an assistant clinical professor at the UCSF School of Medicine who for 20

years has specialized in addiction and pain treatment. About five years ago, Kornfeld developed a program, Recovery Without Walls, for patients to detox and begin life anew without drugs or alcohol.

The problem is not limited to the drugs found at home.

In an effort to better control online drug sales, Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., is sponsoring legislation to require businesses that distribute controlled substances through the Internet to register with the Drug Enforcement Administration. The bill passed in the Senate in April and awaits a vote in the House. The bill was prompted by the fatal Vicodin overdose of Ryan Haight, a 17-year-old in San Diego who bought the painkiller online.

"Teenagers and young people across the country can often get dangerous drugs on the Internet," Feinstein said. "We need to stop it, and this bill would be a major step forward."

Teens are particularly vulnerable to addiction, said San Francisco psychologist Dean Blumberg, a program manager with Kaiser Permanente's Chemical Dependency Recovery Program.

"The brain isn't fully formed until age 24," he said. "You can get addicted anytime, but the two most vulnerable times are adolescence and old age."

"A lot of parents aren't very aware - often they are the last to know. Many parents don't get their teens to us until their senior year of high school - then they lament not bringing them in when they are 15 or 16."

Warning signs of abuse

Blumberg says that some warning signs of substance abuse can initially appear to be the hallmarks of adolescence: mood swings, irritability, altered sleep patterns. But chronic drug users, he said, have more telltale symptoms that parents should heed: groggy demeanor, pinpoint pupils, nasal irritation, weight loss, paranoia, depression, truancy, falling grades.

Peter Koo, a clinical professor of pharmacy at the UCSF Medical Center, said much of the problem can be pinned on people who are careless about unused medications.

"They tend to forget the pills are in there, or they feel they paid for them and don't want to toss them," he said. "It's an invitation if a teenager is looking for drugs. Teenagers are prone to experimentation, and having the medication in the home makes it easier because it is free. We need to make parents more accountable to their medications - when you are done with them, throw them out."

In similarly urging parents to pay closer heed, the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse prescribes some old-fashioned remedies including better monitoring of kids on school nights and more time around the family dinner table.

"Preventing substance abuse among teens is primarily a mom-and-pop operation," said Califano. "It is inexcusable that there are so many problem parents who don't try harder, who fail to appropriately monitor their children on school nights, fail to keep dangerous prescription drugs out of their reach, and tolerate drug-infected schools for their children."

Safeguarding prescription drugs: tips for parents from the national youth anti-drug media campaign

Keep track: Take note of how many pills are in a bottle or pill packet, and keep track of refills.

Set rules: Set clear rules for teens about all drug use, including not sharing medicine and always following the medical provider's advice and dosage.

Follow rules: Be a good role model by following these rules with your own medicines.

Dispose of them properly: Properly conceal and dispose of old or unused medicines in the trash.

Spread the word: Ask friends and family to safeguard their prescription drugs.

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This article appeared on page **A - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle