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'Pharma parties' a troubling trend among youths

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Dr. Howard Kornfeld, shown near his Mill Valley office, says many teens think of pharmaceuticals as safe.

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It started out with a pal saying painkillers could be a cool high. Joe was 15. He wanted the high, and he wanted to be cool.

"I said, 'Hey, I have some of that at home,' and so we went and I grabbed a couple of Percocets out of my stepdad's bottle," Joe said. "It was easy. My stepdad had a lot of surgeries, so he had a lot of pills."

The pills went down quick, and the smooth buzz was free and felt

safe. Within weeks Joe and his pal were having other pals over, digging into the medicine cabinet deeper each time - a little Vicodin here, a little OxyContin there, usually with some whiskey and vodka to wash everything down.

"Once word got around that I had all these drugs at home, I looked pretty cool to my friends," said Joe, who asked that his full name and location not be disclosed because he is still in high school and doesn't want everyone knowing his history with drugs. "And from there it just grew."

Joe and his friends had discovered the seductive wonder of "pharma parties" - and before long, the horror of addiction.

Pharma parties, where kids get together to share drugs pilfered from their parents' pill bottles, have been a known phenomenon for only a few years, experts say. But the phenomenon is getting worse.

Drug use up

A study released this month by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America shows that 63 percent of American teenagers in grades nine to 12 believe prescription drugs are easy to steal from their parents' medicine cabinets, up from 56 percent last year.

The same study shows that 20 percent of the kids in the same grade group have abused prescription medication at least once, up from similar surveys in 2000 showing about half that rate of abuse.

The problem appears to begin primarily in the middle class, experts say, among relatively comfortable kids who turn to pills - mostly painkillers - for relief from stress or a cheap high they can get without going to a sketchy drug dealer.

It's not clear how many kids die from pharma parties, but according to a recent study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the number of deaths from overdosing on opiate-based prescription painkillers like OxyContin more than tripled from 1999 to

2006, to 13,800. That constituted the majority of the 26,000 overdose deaths in the United States in 2006 from both legal and illegal drugs.

At least one youth in California has died from ingesting medicines at a party in the past two years - a 17-year-old boy in Visalia in 2008 who overdosed on OxyContin.

'Kids don't understand'

"This problem of kids abusing pharmaceuticals is growing in leaps and bounds, and pharma parties are a big part of that," said Dr. Barry Karlin, CEO of the CRC Health Group of Cupertino, one of the biggest substance abuse treatment providers in the nation. "Kids don't understand the risk factor. They don't realize that even though they may think of them as a recreational thing, prescription drugs can lead to as much trouble as heroin or cocaine."

Joe - who lived for some time in Southern California but now resides out of state - said the trouble didn't just approximate heroin. It drove him straight into it.

"Percocet was my favorite pill, but I liked OxyContin too, and at the height of my addiction I could go through 35 to 40 pills a day," said Joe, now 18. "It got to be so many that I had to barter pills with my friends, sell and buy to keep it up."

Once Joe was enslaved to pills, a friend turned him on to heroin, which cost about half as much as his \$100-a-day pill habit to get high. That was that.

"I didn't even look back at the pharmaceuticals once I found heroin," Joe said. "And when it got to the point where I was sick every day without it, I knew I needed help."

His parents had discovered his pill abuse before he turned to heroin by finally noticing how quickly the bottles were emptying. But like many parents, experts say, they didn't think it was serious. It was only after one of Joe's acquaintances outed his habit that they took action.

6 months in rehab

They wound up sending him to Utah, to the Outback residential rehabilitation center for addicted youths, which treats many patients from Northern California. After six months there, he was clean.

"I grew up thinking drugs and alcohol are something everyone did, and I didn't see there were actually people who didn't do it," Joe said. "It's all over - in movies and music. I mean, I really liked rap, and that's all about bling and smoking weed and drinking."

"One of the most important things I learned is you don't hang out with the same friends. Everyone in my high school crowd used this stuff, and I'm the only one who's gotten clean."

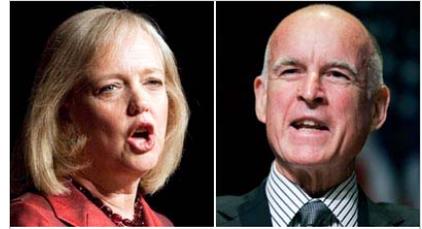
There are apparently no statistics about how many youths participate in pharma parties, but several rehabilitation doctors say about 5 to 10 percent of their young patients say they've been at them.

"The research on this is pretty foggy, but pharma parties are there," said Dr. Ryan Anderson, a therapist at Outback. "They're kind of like the highly dramatic poster child of prescription drug abuse."

Pills in a bowl

The most extreme pharma parties he has dealt with consist of kids tossing several kinds of pills blindly into bowls and then snatching out hits at random, Anderson said. They are the rarest form of pharma party and are terrifying to typical pharmaceutical junkies.

"Those parties where kids all just dump the drugs into a bowl and take handfuls just to see what happens - just the idea of that scares me to death," said Peter, who became addicted to OxyContin out of friends' medicine cabinets as a teenager, and needed a stint in rehab to get clean. The 24-year-old San Francisco man didn't want his full name used because his recovery philosophy requires that he not draw attention to himself.



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"I mean, I was addicted so badly I went to heroin and crack, and even I wouldn't put my hand in a bowl and just take whatever," he said.

Stress a factor

Dr. Howard Kornfeld of Mill Valley specializes in treating youthful addicts at his Recovery Without Walls clinic, and he said his experience is that many kids turn to pharmaceuticals initially because they are just experimenting and think they are safe.

"But some of them have underlying depression or anxiety disorders, or they are painfully shy, and they start taking pills to function or to feel good at a party," Kornfeld said. "Early on, the kids can even look good, take tests better, and their parents can be fooled."

"But as the habit builds up, it takes a higher dose to do the job," he said. "And then the kid is not doing so well, looks ragged, and the parents notice money is missing. Then there's a crisis, and those of us in addiction medicine get a call."

Karlin thinks pharmaceutical addiction among youths is growing because they are more stressed out than ever.

"Kids are getting more pressure in school, more pressure to go to college, hearing more than ever about the demands of the workplace," he said. "For the first time kids are learning that their generation will probably not have an improvement in their lives over their parents' generation."

The best thing parents can do, other than try hard to listen to their kids and be tuned to signs of addictive trouble?

"I tell people to lock their medications up," Karlin said.

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