



Prescription Drugs and Teenagers

A Dangerous New High

When Amanda was 14 years of age, she had the last of four sinus surgeries. The best part of the whole process, according to Amanda, was that she received hydrocodone or a common pain pill called Vicodin, Lortab, Norco, etc, every time. She took some of the pills for her pain and brought the rest, along with some medications she'd stolen from her mom, to parties at her friends' houses. There, she and her friends would get high on those and other prescription drugs. Forget BYOB. For some teenagers, parties today are of the bring-your-own-pills variety.

Teenagers today will bring whatever they can get their hands on: Vicodin, Percocet, Percodan, Oxycontin and other pain killers; antianxiety medications like Xanax, Valium, Klonopin, Ativan; stimulants like Adderall and Ritalin; and over-the-counter (OTC) drugs. Then they begin the dangerous game of prescription drug and OTC roulette.

These gatherings are called "pharming parties", and they can be destructive and deadly. These parties are taking place in living rooms and basements across the country. At some parties, the teenagers toss their pharmaceutical offerings into a communal bowl, called the "salad bowl", grab an assortment as if the pills were M&M's and knock them back, usually with alcohol. At others parties it can be more organized, with bartering and negotiations. Someone will say, "I have an X, which is harder to get. You will have to give me three of what you have to get one of what I have."

Alarming New Trend

The abuse of prescription drugs, a practice known as "pharming", is rampant among middle and high school students. According to a 2005 report from Columbia University's National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA), 2.3 million kids ages 12-17 abused prescription drugs in 2003. More recent studies indicate that the trend is escalating.

What's frightening is that so many kids are doing it and parents are completely unaware. This problem is not on the parent's radar. But it should be: A National Institute on Drug Abuse survey estimates there's been a 25% increase each year since 2001 in the use of

sedatives and barbiturates among high school seniors.

These "pharming parties" are the cool thing to do according to many teenagers. Technology, in part, is to blame. Technology is allowing kids to communicate more often and quicker making the passing on of information easier.

Kids aren't looking for any specific medication. Conventional wisdom used to be that it was an Oxycontin problem. Most authorities know now that it has nothing to do with the brand of medication. Teenagers admit that the newer the product, the more interesting. Kids will take it and figure out how to mix it with other things to get a different kind of high. Kids want to know how to get high quicker, faster and they want to find the best buzz. That's why they combine the drugs with one another and with the alcohol and illegal drugs such as marijuana - sometimes with fatal results.

Deadly Doses

Approximately five years ago, when I was practicing medicine in the state of Michigan, I lost an 18 year old male patient to the lethal combination of beer and methadone, a potent prescription narcotic.

The patient was staying with friends for the night. He talked with his parents over the phone around 10:30PM. This was the last time his parents would ever talk to him. His friends found him unconscious the next morning. They rushed him to the Emergency Room where I got involved in his care. We worked on him for over 90 minutes but he finally went into cardiac arrest and died.

Prescription drugs are pretty safe when used correctly. But kids take risks without fully comprehending the consequences. An example: Oxycontin. As prescribed, it's a perfectly legitimate pain medication. As the pill dissolves, it gradually releases its payload, for long lasting pain relief. But teens will often crush the pill before ingesting it or even snorting it, releasing all the medication at once. One pill could lead to overdose.

Even worse, kids rarely take just one pill. Many of the drugs at a "pharming party" are depressants, which slow down brain activity. Now add alcohol, another depressant, to the mix. All decrease brain activity, and they enhance one another. So a Vicodin-Ambien-Xanax-booze combination can be extremely dangerous. It can do more than put you to sleep - you can be put to sleep permanently.

If you combine depressants with stimulants, on the other hand, heartbeat, blood pressure and other systems in the body will start careening up and down. The heart doesn't like this. When you start pushing the heart around, there could be the danger of arrhythmia. It could

progress to a point where the heart is working inefficiently, and then you may have trouble. Things may start collapsing or stopping.

As a physician I am concerned that these young people are taking these drugs while their brains are still forming. These kids are in a fairly critical stage of brain development. Their decision-making skills are being honed. When you disturb that physiology with pharmacology over and over again, the brain may not reach its capacity and may not mature fully. Their ability to make decisions and process information will be compromised, maybe for the rest of their lives.

Why Prescription Drugs?

About 5 million school-age children take a prescription drug every day for some sort of behavior disorder. As a result, kids learn at an early age that if you take a pill, you get a mood change. And many teens view "pharming" as safe, since the drugs are of pharmaceutical quality. This is a frightening myth that can have fatal consequences.

Of course, OTC drugs are also welcome at "pharming parties." Kids abuse cold medications made with dextromethorphan, or DXM. Instead of 1-2 pills recommended, they'll take 2-3 boxes' worth at a time, to create a drug-induced psychosis.

What About the Parents?

Most parents have no idea that their child is addicted. When some parents find out that their kids are abusing prescription drugs, breathe a sigh of relief. They think, Oh, at least my child isn't smoking pot or doing heroin.

But prescription drugs can be more potent than street drugs. One in ten 12th graders admits to using Vicodin at least once in the last year. If I said one in ten kids is using heroin, people would go through the roof. But while heroin sold on the street might be 10-40% opiate, pharmaceutical-grade Vicodin could be 10x more powerful an opiate than heroin.

Spiraling out of Control

Many kids are taking these drugs because they find life hard to take. Many are also proud of their drinking and drugging activities. They also think that young people can't get addicted and that young people will not go through withdrawals - obviously these statements are false.

I want people who are getting into drugs to know how bad it can get and to let them know that there is a way out!

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