What parents should know about teen use of prescription, OTC drugs: a NetWellness column

By Plain Dealer guest columnist
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The fact of the matter is that teens are abusing prescription and over-the-counter drugs in alarming numbers. This is the first of two columns about that abuse, and what parents need to know.

Dangerous drugs in your medicine cabinet

Some of the most commonly abused drugs by teens and young adults today are probably sitting in your medicine cabinet. Prescription and over-the-counter drugs are found in the medicine cabinets of almost every household. But what too many parents do not know is that abuse of these drugs is a major problem.

A study by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America found that among teens:

- Roughly 1 in 5 has abused Vicodin
- Roughly 1 in 10 has abused OxyContin
- Roughly 1 in 10 has tried Ritalin and/or Adderall without a prescription
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When used as intended medically, prescription and OTC cough medicines are very safe. They have helped countless people and have saved many lives. However, when they are not taken as intended, these medications can lead to addictions, health problems — even death. But as a parent, you are far from powerless. You can take steps to prevent a problem from forming. You can monitor your child for signs of abuse. And you can help your child if a problem does develop. Read on to find out how.

Why teens abuse prescription and OTC drugs

Teens abuse prescription and OTC drugs for many reasons. Prescription medicines, and even OTC drugs if taken in large doses, can produce a high. They are easy to get. Studies also show many teens believe these FDA approved drugs are much safer to use than street drugs. But they are in fact very dangerous when not used as intended medically.

Steps parents can take to prevent the abuse

Parents can take an active role in preventing the abuse of prescription and over-the-counter drugs by their teens. Take the following steps to help protect your teen:

1. Clean out the medicine cabinet.

One major source of prescription and OTC drugs for teens is the medicine cabinet. Leftover prescriptions or last season's cold pills can be easily accessed by teens. Discard any old or expired medicines. Place medicines that you still need in a safe place.

2. Monitor your teen's Internet habits.

Another major source of prescription drugs for teens is the Internet. Consider placing your family computers in a place where your teen's Internet activities can be monitored. You can also view the Internet history of all household computers to check sites your teen is visiting.

If you suspect a substance abuse problem, you can monitor the mail for unexplained packages. Prescription drugs ordered online are received through the mail or package delivery services.

3. Educate yourself and other parents about the issue.

Prescription and OTC drug abuse is a big problem. Yet too many parents are not aware of the possibility of this type of drug abuse. Educate yourself on the issue. Then educate other parents you know -- such as parents of your teen's friends.
4. Talk to your teen about the dangers and your expectations.

It is important that you keep the lines of communication open with your teen:

- Set clear yet firm rules and consequences.
- Explain your expectations about avoiding drug use.
- Listen to what your teen is saying.

Teens need to hear that abusing prescription and OTC drugs is not safe. Unless used as medically intended, they are very dangerous. Many prescription and OTC drugs can become addictive, and use of these drugs can even result in death.

If you wonder whether talking to your teen will have any impact, be assured that parents are a major force in the lives of their teen children. Two-thirds of kids say that losing their parents' respect and pride was one of the main reasons they didn’t use drugs, according to a survey done by The Partnership for a Drug-Free America. Teens that learn anti-drugs messages at home are also about half as likely to use drugs.

Resources

OTC Drugs

- Legal but Lethal: The Danger of Abusing Over-the-Counter Drugs

Prescription Drugs

- How Do Kids Get Prescription Drugs?
- A Prescription for Danger - Use of Painkillers on the Rise

Talking to Your Teen about Drug Abuse

- The Partnership for a Drug-Free America Action Guide for Parents

This article was written by Jennifer Hoehn a graduate student in the master's of public health program at the Ohio State University College of Public Health.

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