Prescription Drug Abuse

Most people take medicines only for the reasons their doctors prescribe them. But an estimated 20 percent of people in the United States have used prescription drugs for nonmedical reasons. This is prescription drug abuse. It is a serious and growing problem.

Abusing some prescription drugs can lead to addiction. You can develop an addiction to:

- Narcotic painkillers
- Sedatives and tranquilizers
- Stimulants

Experts don't know exactly why this type of drug abuse is increasing. The availability of drugs is probably one reason. Doctors are prescribing more drugs for more health problems than ever before. Online pharmacies make it easy to get prescription drugs without a prescription, even for youngsters.

**Symptoms**

Signs and symptoms of prescription drug abuse depend on the particular drug.

**Opioid painkillers**, such as oxycodone (OxyContin) and those containing hydrocodone (Vicodin)

- **Sedatives and tranquilizers**, such as diazepam (Valium) and lorazepam (Ativan)

- **Stimulants, such as methylphenidate (Ritalin)**, that are used to treat attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and sleep disorders

**Prescription drug abuse symptoms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opioid painkillers</th>
<th>Sedatives and tranquilizers</th>
<th>Stimulants</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constipation</td>
<td>Drowsiness</td>
<td>Weight loss</td>
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<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>Confusion</td>
<td>Agitation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low blood pressure</td>
<td>Unsteady gait</td>
<td>Irritability</td>
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<tr>
<td>Decreased respiration rate</td>
<td>Poor judgment</td>
<td>Insomnia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Confusion</td>
<td>Involuntary and rapid movement of the eyeball</td>
<td>High blood pressure</td>
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Other prescription drug abuse symptoms include:

- Stealing, forging or selling prescriptions
- Taking higher doses than prescribed
Excessive mood swings

Increase or decrease in sleep

Poor decision making

Appearing to be high, unusually energetic or revved up, or sedated

Continually "losing" prescriptions, so more prescriptions must be written

Seeking prescriptions from more than one doctor

Direct consequences
The list below contains examples of some of the more serious consequences of prescription drug abuse.

- **Opioid painkillers** can cause an increased risk of choking, loss of menstrual periods and fertility, and a slowed breathing rate and potential for breathing to stop.

- **Sedatives and tranquilizers** can cause memory problems and abnormal body temperature. Overdose can cause coma or death.

- **Stimulants** can cause seizures or tremors, hallucinations, and increased risk of stroke.

Other consequences
In addition to medical problems and risk of addiction, consequences of prescription drug abuse can include sedation and poor judgment. Further consequences can range from motor vehicle accidents to decreased academic or work performance.

Withdrawal Symptoms:

- **Opioid withdrawal.** Buprenorphine (Buprenex, Subutex) or methadone may be used to ease the symptoms of withdrawal from opioid painkillers. However, the use of these medications to ease withdrawal from opioid addiction in the absence of pain problems is tightly regulated and subject to strict guidelines and at times special licensure. Other drugs — including clonidine (Catapres), a medication primarily used for high blood pressure — can be used to help manage opioid withdrawal symptoms.

- **Sedative withdrawal.** If you've used prescription sedatives for a long time, it may take weeks or even months to slowly taper off them. You may need other types of medications to stabilize your mood or help with anxiety, and you'll need to work closely with your doctor.

- **Stimulant withdrawal.** There are no approved drugs used for treating stimulant withdrawal. Treatment typically focuses on relieving withdrawal symptoms — such as sleep, appetite and mood disturbances.