

**Patient information: Prescription drug abuse (The Basics)**

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

**What is prescription drug abuse?** — "Prescription drug abuse" is another term for when people use prescription medicines in ways that are different from how they were meant to be taken.

Doctors call this type of drug use "abuse" when it has a bad impact on other parts of a person's life. For example, when using the drug too much causes the person to miss work or school, or to have problems getting along with friends or family.

People who abuse prescription drugs might:

- Take drugs that are not prescribed to them
- Take more of the drug than what the label says
- Crush pills and inhale them, or inject them into a vein instead of swallowing them as directed

**What are the most commonly abused prescription drugs?** — The types of prescription drugs that people abuse most often are ([table 1](#)):

- Certain drugs to treat severe pain (called "opioids")
- Drugs that make you feel alert and focused (called "stimulants")
- Drugs that make you feel calm, relaxed, or possibly sleepy (called "anxiolytics")

**What are common signs that a person might be abusing prescription drugs?** — Warning signs of prescription drug abuse include:

- Sudden changes in mood or behavior
- Being more irritable than normal
- Being more sleepy than normal

People who abuse prescription drugs might tell their doctor they need more medicine than they actually do. That way, they can get more of the drug they are abusing. They might also try to get the same prescription medicine from more than one doctor. Some people order drugs on the internet, too.

But most people who abuse prescription drugs get them from a friend or relative, not a doctor.

Prescription drug abuse is common among teenagers. Often, teens take drugs from their parents' medicine cabinet. Other times, they get the drugs from other teens.

**Should I see a doctor or nurse?** — If you are worried that you have a problem with drugs, talk to your doctor or nurse, or to a mental health counselor. They can recommend treatments to help you overcome your problem.

If you think someone close to you is abusing prescription drugs, ask them if they are taking medicines differently from how they are meant to be taken. If they are, encourage them to speak to the doctor who prescribed the drugs. You can also ask your own doctor or counselor for advice.

If you think your child is abusing prescription drugs, talk to his or her doctor.

**How is prescription drug abuse treated?** — The main treatment for prescription drug abuse is counseling. In counseling, you can talk with a doctor or other specialist about how to stop abusing drugs.

Other treatments can include:

- Prescription medicines that make it easier to stop abusing drugs. Medicines like these are available only for some types of drug abuse.

Support groups, such as Narcotics Anonymous. In support groups, people talk about their drug use and share advice on how to quit.

**What is withdrawal?** — When people take drugs for a long time and suddenly stop, they often get symptoms. These symptoms are called "withdrawal," and might include:

- Feeling anxious or restless
- Trouble sleeping
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea

If you have any of these symptoms after stopping a drug, talk with your doctor or nurse. He or she can prescribe medicines to treat these symptoms or suggest ways to help you cope. Medicines can prevent more severe symptoms, such as seizures.

**Can prescription drug abuse be prevented?** — To reduce the chances that you will abuse drugs, you should:

- Tell your doctor about all the medicines you take, including over-the-counter medicines.
- Take medicine only as prescribed.
- Read the instructions from the pharmacist before taking your medicine.
- Ask your doctor or pharmacist about your medicine if you are unsure about how it will affect you.
- Once your health problem is better, throw away any left over pills that were prescribed to treat the problem.

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**GRAPHICS****Commonly abused prescription drugs**

<b>Generic name</b>	<b>US brand names</b>	<b>Prescribed to treat</b>
Codeine and guaifenesin	Robitussin AC®	Cough
Hydrocodone and homatropine	Hycodan® Hydromet®	
Buprenorphine	Buprenex® Butrans®	Severe pain
Codeine		
Codeine and acetaminophen	Tylenol® with codeine No. 3	
Hydrocodone and acetaminophen	Vicodin® Lorcet® Lortab® Others	
Hydromorphone	Dilaudid® Exalgo™	
Methadone	Dolophine®	
Morphine	Avinza® Kadian® Oramorph SR® MS Contin®	
Oxycodone	Oxecta™ Oxycontin® Roxicodone®	
Oxycodone and acetaminophen	Endocet® Percocet® Roxicet® Tylox® Others	
Oxymorphone	Opana®	
Amphetamine and dextroamphetamine	Adderall XR®	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
Methamphetamine	Desoxyn®	
Methylphenidate	Ritalin® Concerta®	

	Daytrana® Others	
Alprazolam	Xanax®	Anxiety and sleep problems
Diazepam	Valium®	
Clonazepam	Klonopin®	
Lorazepam	Ativan®	
Carisoprodol	Soma®	Muscle spasms, back pain

Prescription drugs that are abused to increase muscle growth and to help athletes do better in sports are not covered here. Please see UpToDate article "Use of androgens and other hormones to enhance athletic performance".

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