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Teen Misuse and Abuse of Prescription Drugs Up 33 Percent Since 2008

Parents' Lax Attitudes and Behavior Linked to Teen Rx Drug Misuse and Abuse.

New, nationally projectable survey results released by The Partnership at Drugfree.org and MetLife Foundation confirmed that one in four teens has misused or abused a prescription (Rx) drug at least once in their lifetime – a 33 percent increase over the past five years.

The Partnership Attitude Tracking Study (PATS) also found troubling data on teen misuse or abuse of prescription stimulants.

One in eight teens (13 percent) now reports that they have taken the stimulants Ritalin or Adderall when it was not prescribed for them, at least once in their lifetime.

Contributing to this sustained trend in teen medicine abuse are the lax attitudes and beliefs of parents and caregivers. In fact, nearly one-third of parents say they believe Rx stimulants like Ritalin or Adderall, normally prescribed for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), can improve a teen's academic performance even if the teen does not have ADHD.

Parents are not effectively communicating the dangers of Rx medicine misuse and abuse to their kids, nor are they safeguarding their medications at home and disposing of unused medications properly.

Concerning Trends in Teen Prescription Drug Abuse According to the New PATS Data (2008-2012)

The new PATS data confirm that misuse and abuse of prescription drugs is now a normalized behavior among teens:

- One in four teens (24 percent) reports having misused or abused a prescription drug at least once in their lifetime (up from 18 percent in 2008 to 24 percent in 2012), which translates to about 5 million teens. That is a 33 percent increase over a five-year period.
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Almost one in four teens (23 percent) say their parents don't care as much if they are caught using Rx drugs without a doctor's prescription, compared to getting caught with illegal drugs.
- Of those kids who said they abused Rx medications, one in five (20 percent) has done so before age 14.
- More than a quarter of teens (27 percent) mistakenly believe that misusing and abusing prescription drugs is safer than using street drugs.
- One-third of teens (33 percent) say they believe "it's okay to use prescription drugs that were not prescribed to them to deal with an injury, illness or physical pain."

Significant Increase in Teen Abuse of Stimulants Ritalin and Adderall, Rx Painkiller Abuse Flattening

Rx stimulants are a key area of concern, with misuse and abuse of Ritalin and Adderall in particular driving the noted increases in teen medicine abuse. Stimulants are a class of drugs that enhance brain activity and are commonly prescribed to treat health conditions including ADHD and obesity. The 2012 data found:

- One in eight teens (about 2.7 million) now reports having misused or abused the Rx stimulants Ritalin or Adderall at least once in their lifetime.
- 9 percent of teens (about 1.9 million) report having misused or abused the Rx stimulants Ritalin or Adderall in the past year (up from 6 percent in 2008) and 6 percent of teens (1.3 million) report abuse of Ritalin or Adderall in the past month (up from 4 percent in 2008).
- One in four teens (26 percent) believes that prescription drugs can be used as a study aid.

Abuse of prescription pain medicine remains at unacceptably high levels among teens, but the new PATS data show it may be flattening. Teen abuse of prescription pain relievers like Vicodin and OxyContin has remained stable since 2011, with one in six teens (16 percent) reporting abuse or misuse of an Rx pain reliever at least once in their lifetime and one in 10 teens (10 percent) admitting to abusing or misusing an Rx painkiller in the past year.

Parents' Missed Opportunity: Lax Attitudes and Permissiveness About Rx Drugs Linked to Teen Abuse

Parent permissiveness and lax attitudes toward abuse and misuse of Rx medicines, coupled with teens' ease of access to prescription medicines in the home, are key factors linked to teen

medicine misuse and abuse. The availability of prescription drugs (in the family medicine cabinet, in the homes of friends and family) makes them that much easier to abuse. The new survey findings stress that teens are more likely to abuse Rx medicines if they think their parents "don't care as much if they get caught using prescription drugs, without a doctor's prescription, than they do if they get caught using illegal drugs."

The 2012 PATS study also shows that parents do not seem to be as concerned with prescription drug abuse as they are with use of illicit drugs. A majority of parents (80 percent) are at least somewhat concerned about illicit drug abuse compared to 70 percent who report being concerned about Rx drug abuse. But in reality, teens are more likely to have abused prescription medicine within their lifetime more than many other substances, with 12 percent of teens abusing Ecstasy, nine percent abusing crack/cocaine and 15 percent abusing inhalants within their lifetime.

Mixed Results on Teen Abuse of Other Substances

- Cigarette smoking rates have remained stable, with 22 percent of teens reporting they've used cigarettes in the past month.
- Inhalant abuse also remained stable, with 7 percent of teens indicating they've abused inhalants over the past year.
- In 2012, almost half of teens (45 percent) have used marijuana in their lifetime, four in 10 (39 percent) have used in the past year and one in four (24 percent) have used within the past month. Currently, 57 percent of all teens have used alcohol within the past year (a 10 percent increase from 2008).
- Past-year abuse of over-the-counter (OTC) cough medicine abuse has remained relatively stable at 7 percent (since 2008).
- Methamphetamine use has remained stable, with 4 percent of teens reporting having abused methamphetamine in the past year (since 2008).
- Past-year cocaine use remains at 7 percent (unchanged since 2008).
- Lifetime steroid use is stable at 5 percent (unchanged since 2008).
- Past-year use of Ecstasy is at 8 percent, and has been steadily declining since a surge in prevalence during 2009.
- Past-year use of synthetic drugs is mixed as well, with 12 percent of teens using synthetic marijuana, 4 percent using salvia and 3 percent using bath salts.