

FACT SHEET

Prescription Medications

Prescription medications such as pain relievers, central nervous system (CNS) depressants (e.g. tranquilizers or sedatives), and stimulants (e.g. Ritalin®) are highly beneficial treatments for a variety of health conditions. Pain relievers help people who have chronic pain to lead productive lives; tranquilizers can reduce anxiety and help with sleep disorders; and stimulants are used to treat attention-deficit

hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in youth. Most people who take prescription medications use them responsibly. When misused/abused (*i.e. taken by someone other than the person for whom the medication was prescribed or taken in a manner or dosage other than what was prescribed*) prescription medications can cause serious adverse health effects and may lead to dependency/addiction.

Although many prescription medications can be abused, the following are the three most commonly abused types:

Opioids – usually prescribed to treat pain.

CNS Depressants – used to treat anxiety and sleep disorders.

Stimulants – prescribed to treat ADHD and narcolepsy.

Opioids

Opioids are a family of drugs that have morphine-like effects. Their main use is to relieve pain. Other medical uses include control of coughs and diarrhea, and treatment of addiction to other opioids. Opioid medications include: codeine, morphine, hydromorphone (Dilaudid®), oxycodone (OxyContin®/Percodan®), fentanyl (Duragesic®), meperidene (Demerol®), pentazocine (Talwin®) and propoxyphene (Darvon®) {see fact sheet entitled **Codeine, OxyContin® and Other Opioid Painkillers** for further

information}. Prescription opioids come in various forms - tablets, capsules, syrups, solutions and suppositories. Opioids can produce euphoria, making them attractive to being abused. Opioids can cause drowsiness, constipation, and depending upon the amount taken, depressed breathing. Taking a large single dose could cause severe respiratory depression (slowed breathing) or death.

These medications are only safe to use with other substances under a doctor's supervision. They should not be used with alcohol, antihistamines, barbiturates or benzodiazepines. These substances

slow breathing and their combined effects could lead to a person's respiratory system becoming depressed, which can be life threatening.

Central Nervous System Depressants

CNS depressants can be divided into three groups:

Barbiturates, such as mephobarbital (Mebaral®) and sodium pentobarbital (Nembutal®), are used to promote sleep.

Benzodiazepines, such lorazepam (Ativan®), diazepam (Valium®), alprazolam (Xanax®), and estazolam



(ProSom®), can be prescribed to treat anxiety, acute stress reactions, panic attacks, convulsions and sleep disorders.

Newer **sleep medications**, such as zolpidem (Ambien®), zaleplon (Sonata®), and eszopiclone (Lunesta®), are now more commonly prescribed to treat sleep disorders. These medications are non-benzodiazepines and appear to have a lower risk for abuse and dependency.

Despite their beneficial effects for people suffering from anxiety or sleep disorders, barbiturates and benzodiazepines can be addictive and should be used only as prescribed.

CNS depressants should not be combined with any medication or substance that causes drowsiness, including prescription pain medicines, some over-the-counter cold and allergy medications, or alcohol. If combined, they can slow both the heart and respiration, which can be fatal.

Stimulants

Stimulants, such as amphetamines (Dexedrine®) and methylphenidate (Ritalin®), increase alertness, attention and energy. Since they increase dopamine, they can produce a sense of euphoria. Stimulants also increase blood pressure and heart rate, constrict blood vessels, increase blood glucose and open up the pathways of the respiratory system.

The consequences of stimulant abuse can be extremely dangerous. Taking high doses of a stimulant can result in an irregular heartbeat, dangerously high body temperatures, and/or the potential for cardiovascular failure or seizures. Taking high doses of some stimulants repeatedly over a short period of time can lead to hostility or feelings of paranoia in some people. Stimulants should not be mixed with antidepressants, which may enhance the effects of a stimulant. Also, stimulants should not be mixed with over-

the-counter cold medicines containing decongestants, as this may cause blood pressure to become dangerously high or lead to irregular heart rhythms.

Sources:

- National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA): <http://www.drugabuse.gov/Infofacts/Painmed.html>
- Centre for Addictions and Mental Health (CAMH)