



# PENNSYLVANIA SHERIFFS' ASSOCIATION

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## NEWS YOU CAN USE

### **HEROIN** ← → **PRESCRIPTION MEDICATION** **THE DEADLY CONNECTION**

Recently in Pennsylvania and several other states, there have been a number of deaths directly related to heroin laced with Fentanyl, a very potent opiate used by anesthesiologists. It's measured in micrograms it is that potent. An already potentially deadly habit is now compounded by an equally deadly contaminant. Law enforcement have seen a disturbing rise in the number of heroin users and heroin overdoses over the past several years. One directly correlated reason behind this alarming rise is difficulty in obtaining prescription medications, such as Oxycontin, which creates a similar euphoric high for the user. With the crackdown on "pill mills" and the Government's attempts to curb the abuse of prescription drugs, heroin has become more prolific and less expensive to purchase. Less availability of some pain medication on the streets forced users to heroin as it was more easily obtainable.

Between 2007 and 2012, heroin use rose 79 percent nationwide, according to U.S. federal data. Within the same period, the data show, 81 percent of first-time heroin users had previously abused prescription drugs.

#### **How is heroin linked to prescription drug abuse?**

Harmful health consequences resulting from the abuse of opioid medications that are prescribed for the treatment of pain, have dramatically increased in recent years. People often assume prescription pain relievers are safer than illicit drugs because they are medically prescribed; however, when these drugs are taken for reasons or in ways or amounts not intended by a doctor, or taken by someone other than the person for whom they are prescribed, they can result in severe adverse health effects including addiction, overdose, and death, especially when combined with other drugs or alcohol.

Research now suggests that abuse of these medications may actually open the door to heroin use. Nearly half of young people who inject heroin surveyed in three recent studies reported abusing prescription opioids before starting to use heroin. Some individuals reported switching to heroin because it is cheaper and easier to obtain than prescription opioids.

#### **Most teenagers who abuse prescription drugs are given them for free from a friend or relative**

Unaware of the dangers of sharing medications, people often unknowingly contribute to this form of abuse by sharing their unused pain relievers with their family members.

*Taking drugs like those discussed in this newsletter for another purpose than prescribed can produce pleasurable effects at sufficient quantities, so taking them for the purpose of getting high is one of the main reasons people abuse them.*

# MOST COMMONLY ABUSED PRESCRIPTION MEDICATIONS

Most addictive prescription medication can be separated into three general categories: opioids, CNS depressants, and stimulants.

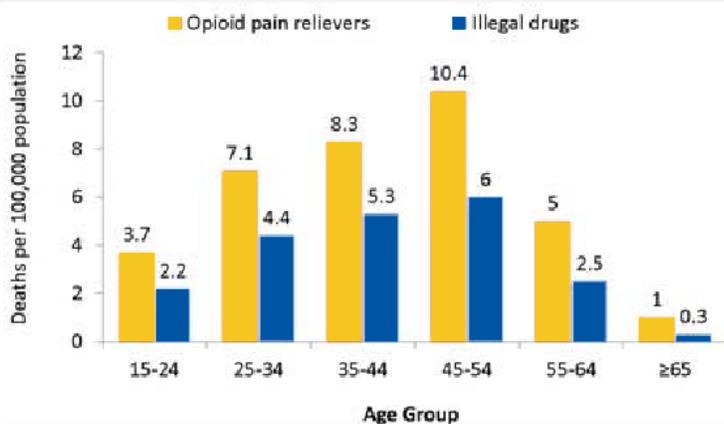
**Opioids** or narcotic painkillers attach to opioid receptors which are proteins throughout the body, including the brain, spinal cord and organs. Once attached, the morphine derivative can reduce pain in the affected area. Unfortunately, opioids also influence the parts of the brain that handle pleasure, which can often lead to addiction. Opioids are commonly prescribed for traumatic injuries and after surgical procedures and are the most popular type of abused prescription medications. Popular abused opioids include codeine, morphine, methadone, fentanyl and analogs, and oxycodone.

**Central Nervous system(CNS) depressants** or sedatives and tranquilizers will decrease or slow down brain activity by inhibiting the activity of other brain cells resulting in drowsiness or calm. Alcohol is another CNS depressant and if combined with medication can cause confusion, slowed breathing and sometimes seizures. CNS depressants are commonly prescribed for anxiety and sleep disorders. Popular abused CNS depressants include barbiturates, benzodiazepines (valium and Xanax), and sleep medications (Ambien and Lunesta).

**Stimulants** mimic and increase the chemical structures of specific brain neurotransmitters, allowing for messages to be sent to each other. Stimulants can increase and improve attention, focus, alertness, and energy. Abuse of stimulants can cause anxiety, high blood pressure, and in some cases, heart attacks. Stimulants are often prescribed to ADHD sufferers. Popular abused stimulants include amphetamines (Adderall) and methylphenidates (Ritalin).

In a study conducted by the University of Michigan, Vicodin, a painkiller, was the top prescription drug abused by high school seniors representing 8.1% of all drugs, pharmaceutical and nonmedical used. Adderall, a stimulant followed at 6.5%.

## Deaths from Opioid Pain Relievers Exceed Those from All Illegal Drugs



Source: CDC, Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, 60(43): 1489, 2011.

**Any and all prescription medication used improperly can be dangerous! Unused medication should be properly disposed of.**

**Please refer to page 4 for tips on safely disposing of unwanted and unused prescription medications.**

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Information used was obtained at the National Institute on Drug Abuse. For additional information please visit their site at <http://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/>

**CCAP** COUNTY COMMISSIONERS™ ASSOCIATION OF PENNSYLVANIA  
**INSURANCE PROGRAMS**

## SHORT AND LONG TERM EFFECTS OF HEROIN USE

### Short-Term Effects

"Rush"

Depressed respiration

Clouded mental functioning

Nausea and vomiting

Suppression of pain

Spontaneous abortion

### Long-Term Effects

Addiction

Infectious disease (e.g., HIV, hepatitis B and C)

Collapsed veins

Bacterial infections

Abscesses

Infection of heart lining and valves

Arthritis and other rheumatologic problems

Liver and kidney disease

## How Do Prescription and OTC Drugs Affect the Brain?

Taken as intended, prescription and OTC drugs safely treat specific mental or physical symptoms. But when taken in different quantities or when such symptoms aren't present, they may affect the brain in ways very similar to illicit drugs.

Stimulants such as **Ritalin** achieve their effects by acting on the same neurotransmitter systems as cocaine.

**Opioid** pain relievers such as **OxyContin** attach to the same cell receptors targeted by illegal opioids like heroin. Prescription depressants produce sedating or calming effects in the same manner as the club drugs **GHB** and **rohypnol**. And when taken in very high doses, **dextromethorphan** acts on the same cell receptors as **PCP** or **ketamine**, producing similar out-of-body experiences.

When abused, all of these classes of drugs directly or indirectly cause a pleasurable increase in the amount of dopamine in the brain's reward pathway. Repeatedly seeking to experience that feeling can lead to addiction.

## Other Health Effects of Prescription and OTC Drugs

Stimulants can have strong effects on the cardiovascular system. Taking high doses of a stimulant can dangerously raise body temperature and cause irregular heartbeat or even heart failure or seizures. Also, taking some stimulants in high doses or repeatedly can lead to hostility or feelings of paranoia.

**Opioids** can produce drowsiness, cause constipation, and—depending upon the amount taken—depress breathing. The latter effect makes opioids particularly dangerous, especially when they are snorted or injected or combined with other drugs or alcohol. More people die from overdoses of prescription opioids than from all other drugs combined, including heroin and cocaine.

**CNS depressants** slow down brain activity and can cause sleepiness and loss of coordination. Continued use can lead to physical dependence and withdrawal symptoms if discontinuing use.

**Dextromethorphan** can cause impaired motor function, numbness, nausea or vomiting, and increased heart rate and blood pressure. On rare occasions, hypoxic brain damage—caused by severe respiratory depression and a lack of oxygen to the brain—has occurred due to the combination of dextromethorphan with decongestants often found in the medication.

All of these drugs have the potential for addiction, and this risk is amplified when they are abused. Also, as with other drugs, abuse of prescription and OTC drugs can alter a person's judgment and decision making, leading to dangerous behaviors such as unsafe sex and drugged driving.

**Keeping our youth safe is everyone's responsibility. You can make the difference by removing the temptation of the easy high which could lead to abuse, addiction, or death. Parents and grandparents, relatives and friends should dispose of any and all prescription medications that are expired, unused, and unwanted. The price of addiction is high and we lose far too many of our children to drug abuse. Disposal has never been easier or safer. So clean out the medicine cabinet and remove the temptation.**

**It only costs you your time. See page 4 for convenient disposal.**

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**GETTING RID OF UNWANTED PRESCRIPTION DRUGS SAFELY IS EASY TO DO. EVERY COUNTY AROUND OUR COMMONWEALTH HAS SEVERAL MEANS FOR EASY DISPOSAL SO THESE DRUGS DO NOT FALL INTO THE HANDS OF OUR YOUTH OR OTHER DRUG USERS.**

**SEMIANNUALLY, THROUGHOUT THE NATION, LAW ENFORCEMENT HOST "Drug Take Back Days" for you to safely and easily get rid of those unwanted prescriptions. These events occur at the end of April and again in the fall.**

**IN PENNSYLVANIA, ALMOST EVERY COURTHOUSE HAS A DISPOSAL BIN TO DROP YOUR UNWANTED AND UNUSED MEDICATIONS. YOU CAN FIND A LOCATION IN YOUR COUNTY BY VISITING THE PENNSYLVANIA DEPARTMENT OF DRUG AND ALCOHOL PROGRAMS AT <http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt?open=514&objID=1677241&mode=2>**

**SIMPLY CLICK ON YOUR COUNTY AND ALL DROP OFF BIN LOCATIONS ARE DISPLAYED WITH ADDRESSES, HOURS OF OPERATION AND DIRECTIONS.**



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