

Adolescent Opioid Abuse

Opioids are drugs or medications that affect the opioid pain receptors in the body. These drugs and medications are sometimes called narcotics and include morphine and hydrocodone. They are also known by brand names such as Vicodin. Heroin is a recreational drug that is also an opioid.

WHAT ARE OPIOIDS?

When used as medications, opioids are important but powerful medications for severe pain. They are often used to reduce pain when patients are recovering from surgery or major injuries. Adverse effects of these medications can include feeling sleepy, dizzy, or confused. It is not safe to drive a vehicle after taking this type of medication. Another adverse effect is constipation, as these medications slow the digestive system.

One larger concern about these medications is that the body can develop tolerance to them, meaning that the body gets used to them, so the patient may need higher doses to get the same effect. Another major concern is that a patient who takes these medications for a while can develop dependence on them, meaning that the patient feels a need to take the medication, even if they do not need it for pain. Taking large doses of opioids can be fatal, and patients can also become injured or die if driving a car while taking opioids.

While opioids are useful and important medications, they can also be abused and used as recreational drugs. In recent years, it is estimated that about 5 million people in the United States have tried opioids as recreational drugs. There are now more deaths each year from prescription opioids than from heroin and cocaine combined.

HOW CAN OPIOID ABUSE BE PREVENTED?

Some teens get exposed to opioids and abuse them as recreational drugs. One way that teens may initially try opioids is by finding them in their own home. If family members have taken any opioid medications in the past, they should make sure they have properly disposed of any remaining pills so that children and teens cannot access them. If they are currently taking these medications, they should keep them in a locked cabinet.

Parents should talk with their children about their family's views on drugs and why it is important to avoid all recreational drugs. This is a conversation that should ideally take place early in the teenage years and on multiple occasions. Parents can use scenes from media, such as television, music, or movies that show drug use, as a time to touch base with their child about their current views or questions about drugs. Parents should



also talk to their doctor if they are concerned that their child may have a drug abuse problem.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

National Institute on Drug Abuse
<http://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/topics-in-brief/prescription-drug-abuse>

INFORM YOURSELF

To find this and other Advice for Patients articles, go to the Advice for Patients link on the *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* website at <http://archpedi.ama-assn.org/>.

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