



**Your Teens and Your Prescriptions**  
***Don't Let Good Kids (or Good Meds) Go Bad!***

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You probably know of prescription pain killers such as OxyContin, Vicodin, and Percocet. You should know that these meds can be good and useful, because “life brings many painful things.” And though we doctors have “pills for ills and drugs for bugs” we often don’t have a cure for chronic pain. We commonly use medications like these to control pain whenever possible and prudent.



And you certainly know teenagers. You were one yourself. All kids are good kids, though no one is good in every way. For example, most teenage boys are about 10 minutes away from doing something stupid, if given the chance. And, among the common stupid things teens may do is “borrowing” the prescription pain meds of adults, to take in abusive ways. I’m writing to tell you how to prevent these good kids (and good meds) from going bad.

This happens commonly. Among 12th graders in Wisconsin, **22.9 percent** say they have taken painkillers such as OxyContin, Percocet, or Vicodin without a doctor’s prescription. I live in Wisconsin in Outagamie County, where we have great health care, fine schools and where “all the children are above average.” Our prevalence of teen prescription abuse is even higher than the state’s average, with almost **25 percent** of high school seniors admitting to it.\*

High availability of health care services may make prescription abuse more likely among teens. That’s because more adults in such areas have been prescribed chronic pain meds, and probably correctly so. But that makes it easier for teens to “borrow” them, with or without the adult’s knowledge.

And make no mistakes about it; good meds go very bad when misused, even becoming lethal. Seizures, overdoses, and respiratory depression causing breathing to stop are real hazards of inappropriate use. And these “worst case scenarios” can happen easily, especially if other medications or alcohol are also misused. It is so easy to misdirect prescriptions that it is becoming part of teen sub-culture. For example, a new phenomenon known as the “pharming” or “bowling” party features different kinds of prescription drugs mixed together in a bowl or a bag (also called “trail mix”). Teenage party-goers pass it, taking pills by the handful. They often don’t know what drugs they are taking or how they will affect their mind or body, nor would emergency medical responders in the event that they need to treat a teen and counteract the drug’s effect.

While these “bowling” parties are extreme examples of “getting high,” it’s interesting that, unlike with other forms of adolescent drug use, the desire to feel good or get high ranks much lower as a motivator for most prescription drug misuse. More often, teens turn to prescription drugs to help manage their daily lives—for example, to lower stress and anxiety, boost their mood or increase performance. Being a teenager is more

complicated now than ever. Like adults, some teens think prescriptions will help them keep going. They may discover it's easy and free to lift them from the home medicine cabinet.

All teens need support from good role models like parents, grandparents, coaches, teachers, and their own doctors. Unfortunately many mistakenly get the message that adults solve their own problems with prescriptions, alcohol and other substances. Here are ways to be a "difference maker" and protect the teens in your lives from misusing prescription pain killers:

If you are a parent:

- **Set limits** and let teens know you will be disappointed. Talking to teenagers works! When important adults communicate the risks, abuse by teens declines. Parents, grandparents, relatives, adult friends, coaches, and activity leaders are all very important influencers of teen behavior.
- **Model good behavior.** Watch how you use medicines in front of teens. Teens learn by example. Use your own medicines responsibly. Take them EXACTLY as prescribed.
- **"Denormalize" the behavior.** While 1 in 5 teens abuse prescription drugs, that means 4 in 5 do not. "Everybody DOESN'T do it!"
- **Debunk common myths:**
  - Prescriptions aren't always safe. When prescription pain meds are abused, they are just as dangerous as street drugs.
  - They can be just as addictive.
  - It's not okay to misuse these drugs, even "once and a while." Experimenting with drugs is NOT a normal part of growing up!

Even if you are not a parent:

- Most people don't keep track of their medications
- Monitor all medications in the home—prescription and OTC medicines.
- Safely store medicines out of children's reach and sight. Consider locking them up.
- Get rid of old or unused medicines. Returning them to a pharmacy for disposal is best.\*\*
- **Don't take any prescription pain pill when you will be driving or on duty at work, unless and until specifically approved to do so by your doctor.** Even if the doctor didn't say you COULDN'T take it that way, don't assume you can. You should always ask directly, "Can I take this and still go to work?" Find out first!

If you want more information (and I really hope you do!), look at the excellent Power Point review of the subject on the web page of the **National Council on Patient Information and Education's (NCPPIE) 24th annual observance of "Talk About Prescriptions" Month (TAP Month).**

[http://www.talkaboutrx.org/rxmonth2009\\_maximizing.jsp#article](http://www.talkaboutrx.org/rxmonth2009_maximizing.jsp#article)

And, I've included five fliers from the CDC, which give great summaries.

Talking to Your Teens About Prescription Drug Abuse

<http://www.affinityhealth.org/object/services-specialty-occupational-blog-teens-PDF1.html>

Maximizing Your Role as a Teen Influencer

<http://www.affinityhealth.org/object/services-specialty-occupational-blog-teens-PDF2.html>

Why Teens Turn to Prescription Drugs

<http://www.affinityhealth.org/object/services-specialty-occupational-blog-teens-PDF3.html>

Warning Signs and Symptoms of Prescription Drug Abuse

<http://www.affinityhealth.org/object/services-specialty-occupational-blog-teens-PDF4.html>

6 Myths About Teens and Prescription Drug Abuse

<http://www.affinityhealth.org/object/services-specialty-occupational-blog-teens-PDF5.html>

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\*2007 Wisconsin Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)

<http://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/yrbsindx.html>

\*\*Adapted from NCPIE