

HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS: Maximizing Your Role as a Teen Influencer

There's a new drug of choice among teens these days; and it may be as close as the nearest medicine cabinet.

While rates of tobacco, alcohol and illicit drug abuse are down overall, more and more teens are abusing prescription drugs. One in five teens (or 4.5 million) report using prescription medication recreationally either to get high or because they believe these medications might help mitigate stress or depression. It's surprisingly easy for teens to get their hands on prescription drugs from their families' medicine cabinets, someone's purse or even a schoolmate's locker.

Healthcare providers are uniquely positioned to identify and help prevent prescription and over-the-counter drug abuse by teens. Whether you're a doctor, nurse, pharmacist, social worker or other community or school-based healthcare provider, you can take steps to help prevent prescription drug abuse.

To help get to the source of the problem, healthcare providers (especially prescribers) should talk to *all* patients about the safe use of medications, including knowing what prescription drugs they and other family members use, monitoring and safely storing these medications so they are out of children's' sight and reach, and properly disposing of any unused or expired prescriptions. School-based healthcare providers—school nurses, psychologists and social workers—are especially attuned to the stressors facing teens these days and can often pick up on teens at risk for drug-taking behaviors.

Healthcare Providers Matter

- Healthcare providers across a variety of settings have regular opportunities to assess emotional and physical development of teenage patients, as well as their adjustment to life changes and stressors. Ongoing check-ins with teens about their physical and mental well being is important and provides opportunities to talk to with them about drug-taking behaviors, especially with those who show signs of being at risk for misusing or abusing drugs.
- By focusing on principles of safe medication use with teens, healthcare providers can help normalize these practices and dispel myths about prescription drug use and abuse.

- Healthcare providers not only have the ability to prescribe medications appropriately, but they also have the skills and training needed to identify prescription drug abuse and help teens and their parents recognize the problem early on.
- Research shows that by talking about substance abuse problems with patients, medical professionals can positively impact a patient's willingness to address addiction. Talking with teens is especially important given their propensity for risk-taking behaviors and because most addictions start during adolescence.

Take advantage of opportunities to talk to teenage patients about how to make healthy life choices and avoid prescription drug abuse and other high-risk behaviors. Doctors, nurses and other community and school-based health professionals can make a difference.

10 Things You Can Do to Make a Difference

Below are steps you can take to educate teens and other teen influencers about teen prescription drug abuse and help mobilize your colleagues and local community to do their part to help prevent prescription drug abuse.

Look for teachable moments—a window of time to increase awareness of the problem and relay important drug prevention messages—when consulting with teens or their parents. Whether it's in the exam room or another healthcare setting, take advantage of opportunities to educate teens about the dangers of prescription drugs and promote healthy alternatives. Even a brief conversation can help steer a teen in the right direction.

1. **Communicate the risks.** Talk to teens to correct misinformation and warn them about the dangers of abusing prescription medications. Let them know that just because prescription drugs are legal, that doesn't mean they're safe, especially when they are used in the wrong way or by someone for whom they weren't prescribed. Emphasize that mixing drugs can be particularly dangerous and that the only safe way to take a prescription medication is under the care and supervision of a medical professional. Give them some concrete examples of the health risks associated with prescription drug abuse, including what too many stimulants, sedatives and/or painkillers can do to their bodies. *This is important because history has shown us that as the perception of risk goes up, teens' willingness to abuse or a misuse substance goes down.*
2. **Closely monitor prescriptions.** Keep a close eye on teens for whom you've prescribed medications, especially those most commonly abused—pain relievers, stimulants and sedatives. Take note of any unusual increases in the amount of a medication needed or requests for refills before the prescribed dose should have run out. This may be the first sign of abuse or misuse. If you suspect something isn't quite right with one of your patients, talk to the teen and his or her parents immediately to find out what's going on.

3. **Know what to look for.** As a medical professional, being observant and noticing changes in patient behavior and attitude is part of your job. Make sure you and your staff/colleagues are familiar with the signs and symptoms of prescription drug abuse so that you can recognize a problem before it gets too serious (See *Warning Signs and Symptoms of Prescription Drug Abuse*).
4. **Think about screening and ask the right questions.** If you don't already, consider screening patients for tobacco, alcohol, illicit or nonmedical prescription drug use. The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) has a new online drug screening tool called NIDAMED to help identify patients who are misusing or abusing prescription drugs or other substances. This interactive resource guides clinicians through a series of short questions and, based on the patients responses, generates a substance abuse risk score that suggests the level of intervention needed.

Even if you haven't implemented a formal screening process, try to broach the topic of prescription drug abuse with your teen patients during their appointments. You may want to start the dialogue by asking:

- Have you ever shared your medication with a friend or another person?
 - Have you ever taken a drug that was not prescribed to you?
 - Do any of your classmates use prescriptions drugs? Which ones?
 - Has anyone asked if you (or your parents, grandparents or anyone else) have any leftover prescription medication they can have or buy?
5. **Check in with parents.** Make a point to ask the parents if they've noticed any behavior changes (e.g., mood swings, depression, extreme tiredness, extreme change in friends, a drop in grades or class attendance) or physical changes (e.g., unexplained weight loss, acne). While some of these changes can be common in the teen years, they may also be red flags for drug abuse. Alert parents to the growing problem of teen abuse of prescription drugs and refer them to the handouts, as well as other anti-drug resources (see Resource listing). Talk with them about monitoring, safely storing and disposing prescription medications at their home and those of older relatives, who are most likely taking multiple medications.

Remind parents and teens that there is help within their school or community. Guidance counselors, school social workers, psychologists and nurses are on hand to talk with students.

6. **Reinforce positive behaviors.** Lifetime habits may form during the teen years. In addition to discouraging potentially risky health behaviors like prescription drug abuse, it's also important for healthcare providers to reinforce positive health behaviors (e.g. exercise, healthy eating). Give teens some tips and techniques for coping with stress and anxiety in a healthy way.
7. **Team up.** Doctors, nurses, pharmacists and other health professionals should work together to address the potential for prescription drug abuse in their communities. Each has a role to play. For example, pharmacists are able to give quick, face-to-face reminders about the safe and legal use of prescription drugs and give tips on what parents can do to keep medications from ending up in the wrong hands.
8. **Spread the word.** Keep your office or clinic stocked with information and educational materials that parents and teens can read to further educate themselves on the issue and help get the word out to others. Take time to create a display in your waiting room to raise awareness about the issue and help answer parent questions. And you don't have to reinvent the wheel. Many materials and tools are already available through the *Maximizing Your Role as a Teen Influencer* program and other national organizations, such as the Partnership for a Drug-Free America.
9. **Be a leader.** Physicians and other healthcare providers have enormous credibility and influence in the community and can serve as local champions to raise awareness about the health risks facing teens. Offer to give the *Maximizing Your Role as a Teen Influencer* workshop to local schools and community organizations. Remember that religious and community organizations that are already working with youth and their families can also help spread the word to parents and other teen influencers (e.g., Boys & Girls Clubs, YMCA/YWCA). Your knowledge on teen health will be a welcome addition to local groups working to prevent prescription drug abuse.
10. **Take action locally.** Consider partnering with local community anti-drug coalition. You can find out if there is one in your area by contacting the Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America (CADCA) at www.cadca.org or the Partnership for a Drug-Free America at www.drugfree.org. Sign up to speak at your local Rotary Club, Parent/teacher group, places of worship or other places where you have an audience that is actively engaged with the welfare of teens.