

Opiate/Opioids: Reaching Epidemic Proportions

Alarming, the use of opiates/opioids by teens has been steadily increasing. Opiates/opioids, classified as narcotic analgesics, are used to relieve pain and can cause numbness and induce a state of unconsciousness. This class of drugs is derived from the opium poppy plant and includes morphine and codeine. It also includes synthetic or partially synthetic formulas, such as Vicodin, Percodan, oxycodone, and heroin.

Teens may consider opioids as “safe” because opioids start out from a plant, and plants are natural, or because opioid drugs are synthetically manufactured in laboratories that are regulated. Opioids are used to help alleviate pain associated with injuries and/or surgeries.

Experts give two reasons for the high rate of painkiller use and abuse among teens. First, there is a myth of sorts among teens that because the drugs are legal and prescribed for legitimate medical use, they are safe. **Teens may find the doctors’ prescriptions to be a sort of seal of approval, justifying to themselves that the drugs are safe for all to use.** Secondly, these drugs are initially easy to get by simply opening the family medicine cabinet or purchasing them from a schoolmate, family member or friend.

But safe, they are not. Opioids are extremely addictive. In addition to that, they present a number of risks to a teen's health. They can cause breathing and heart rate to slow to dangerously low levels, especially when combined with other drugs such as alcohol. Or they can cause cardiac arrest when mixed with certain stimulant drugs.

Furthermore, while most teen opioid abusers begin with prescription pain medications, many often find themselves turning to a much cheaper opioid alternative, HEROIN.

Many young people who use heroin reported abusing prescription opioids like Oxycontin or Vicodin first. Typically, their painkiller abuse started about two years before heroin use.

Users turn to heroin when it becomes easier to get than prescription pills. These days heroin, many times, is easier to purchase on the streets than prescription painkillers and it is also much, much cheaper.

The reality is heroin isn't at all what it used to be. Not only is the drug much more powerful than before, as the purity levels are so much higher than they were back in the 60's and 70's, but heroin also is no longer limited to the dirty-needle, back-alley experience so many of us picture.

Now it's as easy as purchasing a pill, because that's what heroin has become: a powder-filled capsule known as a button, designed to be broken open and snorted, that can be purchased for just \$10. And it regularly can be found on varsity sports teams, on Ivy League campuses, and yes, in safe suburban neighborhoods.

These days, it is not the Janis Joplin's and Jim Morrison's making the headlines for their heroin/opioid overdose deaths but people like Cory Monteith, from the hit TV show, Glee.

More troubling, and even much more common than the famous, are those you never read about in the national headlines, only in the local obituaries. The high school star athlete, the cheerleader, the honor roll student and/or the student council member. Sadly, those are the ones we find ourselves reading about and wondering what could I have done?

The best treatment is always prevention and early intervention. Teens whose parents talk with them on a regular basis about the dangers of drugs are much less likely to use drugs than those whose parents do not. Yet, only one out of four teens say their parents have these conversations with them. For tips on talking to your kids about drugs, visit www.parents.com/kids/problems/drug-abuse/talking-to-your-child-about-drugs.

(Sources: www.drugfree.org; www.livestrong.com; www.philly.com; www.teenvogue.com)