

Health Bulletin

NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND MENTAL HYGIENE

#92 in a series of Health Bulletins on issues of pressing interest to all New Yorkers

Prescription Painkillers The Dangers of Misuse



People often misuse prescription painkillers.

- Misusing prescription painkillers includes taking painkillers without a prescription, taking painkillers that are prescribed to someone else, or using painkillers in ways that they were not prescribed. More than 1.5 million prescriptions for painkillers such as Oxycontin and Vicodin are filled in New York City each year, or one prescription for every five New Yorkers.
- On average, 150 New Yorkers die every year from overdoses involving prescription painkillers.

Anybody can have a problem.

- Men and women of all ethnicities, income levels, social backgrounds and ages misuse prescription painkillers.
- Teenagers can develop problems with prescription painkillers.

Prescription painkillers can be just as dangerous as illegal drugs.

Some can cause overdose or other severe reactions.

- Even though they are prescribed by doctors, prescription painkillers can be very dangerous. They often have the same effects as heroin.
- Prescription painkillers can cause increased pain sensitivity, drowsiness, nausea and vomiting, chronic dry mouth, and skin irritation.
- People can become dependent on or addicted to prescription painkillers.
- An overdose of prescription painkillers can cause a person to stop breathing.



- Prescription painkillers can cause accidental overdose – especially when taken with alcohol or other drugs.
- Accidental overdose is the third leading cause of death among New Yorkers ages 25 to 34, more than ever before.
- Among adult New Yorkers, one in four overdose deaths involve prescription painkillers.

Prevent Overdose

The more prescription painkillers you take, the easier it is to make a mistake. People who take several types of medications are more likely to have dangerous drug interactions, including overdose.

Nearly all accidental drug overdose deaths in New York City involve more than one substance. Do not mix alcohol, anti-anxiety medications or another drug with any prescription painkiller.

Don't put yourself in danger.

Don't buy or share prescription painkillers that are not prescribed for you.

- Taking drugs without a prescription, or sharing prescriptions with someone else, can be dangerous. *It is also against the law.*
- Never buy prescription medicines from people who are not licensed pharmacists or from stores – including online stores – that are not authorized to sell them.
- You can't be sure what you're getting. The medicine could be counterfeit, or mixed with other drugs or substances without your knowledge.



Only take your painkillers the way they were prescribed.

- Don't use painkillers prescribed for one condition for something else. For example, don't take Vicodin to get to sleep, or for depression. (If you are feeling depressed or anxious, talk to your doctor.)
- Never take more of the painkiller than prescribed. If you think you need a higher dose, talk to your doctor. A different medication may work better for you.

Don't put others at risk.

- Keep prescription painkillers in their original labeled containers out of sight and out of reach of children, preferably in a locked cabinet or on a high shelf. Keep track of how many pills are left.
- Get rid of painkillers that you are no longer using. Having prescription painkillers in your home increases the risk that another person in your household might find them and misuse them. Dispose of your medications by flushing them down the toilet.

People can become dependent on prescription painkillers and suffer serious problems.

These include:

- **Craving.** A very strong urge to use.
- **Mixing drugs.** Using more than one substance at a time.
- **Tolerance.** Needing more and more of the medication to get the same effect.
- **Loss of control.** Difficulty stopping or cutting down even when taking the medication is causing health problems, money problems or legal problems.
- **Withdrawal.** Feeling sick when a medication is stopped.
- **Blackouts.** Forgetting all or part of what happens when using.
- **Preoccupation.** Thinking a lot about getting and using a medication; neglecting family, friends, work or school.



Are You Misusing Prescription Painkillers?

Have you ever...

- 1** Thought you were misusing prescription painkillers?
- 2** Become annoyed when someone criticized your prescription painkiller use?
- 3** Felt scared, bad or guilty about misusing prescription painkillers?
- 4** Needed a wake-up dose to feel better in the morning?

YES to 1 or 2 questions = possible problem

YES to 3 or 4 questions = probable dependence



More Information and Help

- For information from the Health Department, visit nyc.gov or call **311**. Additional Health Bulletins are available.
 - #55 Taking Your Medicine: How to Make It Easier
 - #61 Help to Stop Using: Drug Problems Can Be Treated
 - #66 Marijuana – Is It Holding You Back?
 - #69 Is Your Child Abusing Prescription Drugs?
 - #83 Excessive Drinking is Dangerous
 - #87 Feeling Better – Depression
- LifeNet offers 24-hour confidential help for substance abuse and mental health problems.
 - English: **800-LIFENET (800-543-3638)**
 - Spanish: **877-AYUDESE (877-298-3373)**
 - Asian languages (Mandarin, Cantonese and Korean): **877-990-8585**
- Office of National Drug Control Policy: whitehousedrugpolicy.gov
- National Institute on Drug Abuse: drugabuse.gov
- Narcotics Anonymous: newyorkna.org or **212-929-NANA (212-929-6262)**
- Pills Anonymous: pillsanonymous.org or **212-874-0700**
- Call **911** in any medical emergency.

**DIAL
311**

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For Non-Emergency New York City Services
Telephone Interpretation in More Than 170 Languages