How common is prescription drug abuse?

- Nearly one in five teens report abusing prescription drugs to get high.
- The majority of the drugs were obtained through a single doctor.
- Teens most commonly abuse pain relievers (e.g., OxyContin® and Vicodin®), stimulants (e.g., Ritalin® and Adderall®), and sedatives and tranquilizers (e.g., Valium® and Xanax®).

Spend at least part of each visit with your teenaged patients without their parents in the room. Empathize with the stresses of growing up and identify positive outlets that can help relieve their stress, such as sports teams and youth groups. Also ensure that adult patients know how to store and use medicines safely.

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Could my teenaged patients, their families, and other patients be at risk?

- Prescription drug abuse is second only to marijuana use among some teens.
- More than a quarter of drug-related emergency-room visits for people of all ages dealt with prescription drugs in 2005.
- It is surprisingly easy for teens to gain access to these drugs from friends or their own families’ medicine cabinets. Adult patients may also participate in “doctor shopping,” moving from provider to provider to get multiple prescriptions.
- Teens are turning to more dangerous methods such as crushing pills, then snorting or injecting their contents. They also are combining them with alcohol or illicit drugs. At “pharming parties,” they may dump a variety of prescription drugs in a bowl and take them without knowing what they are.
- Children, teens, and college students are savvy Internet users and sometimes order controlled prescription drugs from illegal Web sites.

What happens when prescription drugs fall into the wrong hands?

Many teens—and adults, too—have carefree attitudes toward the use of prescription drugs. People ages 12 to 25 have among the highest rates of prescription drug abuse. Your teenaged patients, their families, and other adult patients may be misinformed about the safe storage and hazards associated with the nonmedical use of prescription drugs.

What questions should I ask my teenaged and adult patients?

At each visit with teenaged patients and their guardians, screen for potential drug problems. Try the CAGE screening tool with teens:

- Have you ever felt the need to C ut down on your use of prescription drugs?
- Have you ever felt A nnoyed by remarks your friends or loved ones made about your use of prescription drugs?
- Have you ever felt G uilty or remorseful about your use of prescription drugs?
- Have you E ver used prescription drugs as a way to “get going,” to “calm down,” or to “study better”?

Additionally, when you meet with adults (including those with teens at home), ask how they use and store medicines in their household. Parents often underestimate teens’ use of prescription drugs.

Ask the following questions:

- What medicines have you taken and when?
- Are you missing prescription drugs from your medicine cabinet?
- Does your pharmacy claim to have prescriptions you did not know about?
- Do you understand how to take your medicines, what other medicines you should avoid while taking them, and how you can safely store them in your home?
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