



Dear Teacher:

This *Heads Up* installment highlights the unique one-on-one interview I had with a teen reporter on the timely issue of prescription-drug abuse.

Although overall teen drug use continues to decline, levels of prescription-drug abuse remain unacceptably high among teens, according to NIDA's latest *Monitoring the Future* survey. Your students may mistakenly believe that prescription drugs are safer to abuse than illegal ones because a doctor prescribes them. While prescription drugs are beneficial when used properly, teens need to know how powerfully addictive and dangerous these medications can be when abused. They also need to know where they can get reliable, science-based answers to their questions.

My discussion with teen reporter Marie French highlights the risk of addiction to prescription drugs and the negative effects addiction can have on a person's health, family, and friends. The student worksheet contains additional helpful information to answer other questions teens might have regarding prescription medications.

We hope you share this important



article and lesson with your students and encourage them to use the facts they learn to make smart choices.

Nora D. Volkow, M.D.
 Director,
 National Institute on Drug Abuse

In This Installment:

- **Student article:** Q&A with Dr. Nora D. Volkow discussing the dangers of prescription-drug abuse among teens.
- **Student worksheet:** Students apply factual information regarding prescription medications to respond to critical-thinking questions.

STRAIGHT TALK ON PRESCRIPTION DRUGS

Lesson Overview: The student article and this accompanying lesson/student worksheet should be used together to encourage students to ask questions about prescription-drug abuse and apply the facts to discuss why this can be dangerous.

Alignment with National Standards

- *Science (NSES):* Life Science: Regulation and behavior; Science in Personal and Social Perspectives: Personal and community health
- *Life Skills (McREL):* Self-Regulation; Thinking and Reasoning

Student Article

Discussion Questions: Choose from the questions below to guide discussion before and after reading "Straight Talk on Prescription Drugs."

Before-Reading Discussion: Explain to students that the article is based on an interview conducted by a teen reporter. Discuss the following questions:

- Why is it important for teens to ask questions? How might answers to questions from another teen be helpful to you?
- What is a myth? How are myths generated and perpetuated?
- Think of sources where you might go to seek out information about drugs. Are these sources reliable or not?
- Have you heard information about prescription drugs that you think might be a myth? How would you find out if the information is true? What are some safe, reliable sources for answers?

After-Reading Discussion:

- What surprised you most about prescription-drug abuse?
- What effects of prescription drugs were unknown to you?

- Did the article change your opinion about prescription drugs and how they should be used?

- What other questions would you ask Dr. Volkow?

Writing Prompts:

- What do you think are the responsibilities of each of the following groups in combating teen prescription-drug abuse: parents, doctors, teens?
- What actions do you think teens can take to keep themselves safe from prescription-drug abuse?

Student Worksheet

Before-Worksheet Discussion: When you are prescribed a drug by your doctor, what information are you given on how to take the medication? Do you always follow those guidelines exactly?

Worksheet: Have students read the Q&A, and then answer the critical-thinking questions.

After-Worksheet Activity:

- **Oral Argument:** Have students choose one critical-thinking question and present a persuasive oral argument on the topic.

More Information

- More facts about prescription-drug abuse and addiction can be found at www.drugabuse.gov/infofacts/PainMed.html.
- For more frequently asked questions about prescription-drug abuse, visit http://teens.drugabuse.gov/facts/facts_rx1.php.
- For additional *Heads Up* articles on prescription drugs and addiction, check out www.scholastic.com/headsup.

For printable past and current articles in the **HEADS UP** series, as well as activities and teaching support, go to www.drugabuse.gov/parent-teacher.html or www.scholastic.com/HEADSUP.



Assignment: You may hear information about prescription drugs in the news, online, or from friends. How do you know what's true? There's a lot to consider, and many teens have questions. Read on for answers to some frequently asked questions from teens.

medications can be abused when not taken as directed.

Q: Are prescription drugs safer than illegal drugs such as cocaine?

A: Abusers of prescription medications may mistakenly believe that because the drugs come from a pharmacy and not from a drug dealer they are safer to take, even at high doses or without a prescription. The fact is that if someone takes prescription medications in a manner that is not as a doctor intended, he or she could face serious health risks—and for certain medications those risks could be addiction and death. Also, abusing prescription drugs—including sharing prescriptions with friends—is illegal.

Q: How can prescription drugs cause death?

A: Opiates, such as Vicodin® and OxyContin®, can depress respiration [slow down a person's breathing] or stop it altogether. They can shut down the part of your brain that tells you to breathe. That's how people die from an overdose. Mixing certain prescription drugs, and even over-the-counter medicines, with alcohol is especially dangerous. If both substances depress respiration, they may amplify each other's effects when taken together—meaning the risk of serious harm or death becomes much greater than when either one is taken alone.

Q: What exactly is a prescription?

A: A prescription is a doctor's written order that authorizes a pharmacist to supply a specific medication for a patient, with instructions on its use. It says who can take the medication, in what amount, and for what length of time. Used exactly according to a doctor's instructions, prescription drugs are usually safe and effective.

Q: How does a doctor determine the prescription a person needs?

A: A doctor writes a prescription based on a patient's medical history, symptoms, and other factors. The doctor asks questions such as, "Are you allergic to any medications?" and "Are you currently taking any other medicines?" These questions help the doctor decide which medications to prescribe and which ones not to.

Q: Doctors prescribe prescription medications, so how can they be unsafe?

A: Prescription medications are powerful drugs. Doctors and pharmacists each take several steps to keep prescription medications safe for people who need them.

Doctors custom fit a prescription to a patient's medical history, age, weight, allergies, and other factors. Pharmacists dispense medication and help patients understand instructions for taking them. Oftentimes, this includes warning labels like: "Take with food" or "Avoid prolonged sunlight" or "Federal law prohibits the transfer of this drug to any person other than the patient for whom it was prescribed." When a friend gives you a prescription—whether it's to cure a sore throat or to get you high—there can be serious health consequences because the medication is tailored to your friend's needs, not yours.

Q: When is someone abusing prescription drugs?

A: Prescription-drug abuse is when someone takes a medication that was prescribed for someone else or purposely takes his or her own medication in a manner or dosage other than what was prescribed. Abuse can include taking a friend's or a relative's prescription to get high, to help you study, to lose weight, to build up muscle, or to treat pain. Even over-the-counter

CRITICAL-THINKING QUESTIONS

Answer the following questions on a separate piece of paper or discuss in a group.

1. Why is it important to tell your doctor about any medical conditions you have and all the medications you take, including prescription drugs, over-the-counter medicines, and dietary supplements?
2. What would you say to someone who asked you for pills that were prescribed only for you?
3. At a party a friend offers you alcohol and a pill. What would you do, and why?
4. Explain why the following statement is a myth: Prescription drugs come from a doctor and a pharmacy, so they must be safe.
5. Explain why the following statement is a myth: It's OK for me to use a prescription from the medicine cabinet that was prescribed for someone else in my family.