



Dear Teacher:

This latest *Heads Up* installment focuses on prescription pain medications—what they are, how they work, and why they can be dangerous to abuse.

According to the *Monitoring the Future* survey, prescription pain medicines are among the most commonly abused drugs by teens after tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana. In fact, in 2009, 9.7 percent of 12th-graders reported nonmedical use of Vicodin®.

One reason that teens may be abusing prescription medications is misperceptions about their safety. Since doctors prescribe prescription painkillers, teens may assume they are safer than “street” drugs. This edition’s student article and lesson will help to dispel this myth by giving facts about prescription painkillers and how abuse can lead to addiction and other serious adverse health effects.

I urge you to share this important article with your students.



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

In This Installment:

- **Student article:** Facts about how prescription pain medications affect the body and why abusing them is dangerous
- **Student worksheet:** A quiz to reinforce key facts and concepts presented in the student article

PRESCRIPTION PAIN MEDICATIONS

Overview: The lesson below and reproducible worksheet on the reverse side reinforce comprehension of facts and concepts in the student article “Prescription Pain Medications.”

Alignment With National Standards

- *Science (NSES):* Life Science: Structure and Function in Living Systems; Science in Personal and Social Perspectives: Personal and Community Health
- *Life Skills (McREL):* Self-Regulation; Thinking and Reasoning

Student Article

Before-Reading Questions:

- What do you know about the difference between pain medicine you might take for a headache and prescription pain medicine?
- Why do you think pain medications such as Vicodin® and OxyContin® require a prescription?

After-Reading Questions (factual responses in *italics*):

- How do opioid medications help control severe pain? (*They mimic the body’s natural pain-relieving chemicals but they’re more powerful and longer lasting.*)
- What factors does a doctor consider when writing a prescription? (*A patient’s other medical conditions or medications; drug-use history; whether an opioid pain reliever will safely and effectively treat the pain, etc.*)
- In what ways are prescription medications most often abused? (*Taking someone else’s medicine; taking a medicine to get high; taking a different dosage, etc.*)
- Why is it dangerous to abuse prescription pain medications? (*Abuse has serious health risks, including*

adverse interactions with other medicines, overdose, and addiction.)

Critical Thinking:

- If a pain medication prescribed to your friend is safe for him to use, why would it be unsafe for you to take?
- What would you say to a friend who tells you that abusing prescription painkillers is a “safer” way to get high?

Student Worksheet

Use the quiz to reinforce comprehension of facts about prescription pain medications.

Answers: 1. A; 2. B; 3. B; 4. A; 5. B; 6. B; 7. D; 8. E; 9. D; 10. C; 11. D

Writing Extensions:

- 1) *Research/Essay assignment:* Research true stories of celebrities or athletes who abused and/or became addicted to prescription painkillers. Drawing upon facts about abuse and addiction, write an essay commenting on the person’s story.
- 2) *Creative writing:* Write a story, poem, or play that depicts facts about prescription drug abuse and addiction. Outline why your main character starts taking a prescription medication, how he or she abuses the medicine, its effects on the body, signs of addiction, and how he or she gets help.

More Information

- For more facts about prescription-drug abuse, visit <http://teens.drugabuse.gov/peerx/>.
- For more facts about drugs, drug abuse, and addiction, visit <http://teens.drugabuse.gov> and www.drugabuse.gov.

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.



Name _____ Date _____

What Do You Know About Prescription Pain Medications?

Answer the questions below to find out what you learned about prescription pain medications.

- Opioid medications relieve pain by mimicking the body's natural pain-relieving chemicals.
(A) True (B) False
- Opioids require a prescription because they are expensive.
(A) True (B) False
- Prescription drugs are safer to abuse than illegal "street" drugs because a doctor prescribes them.
(A) True (B) False
- Taking opioid medications by methods other than how they are prescribed can lead to their reaching the brain very rapidly, increasing the risk of addiction and overdose.
(A) True (B) False
- Prescription painkillers include medications from a class of drugs called:
(A) stimulants
(B) opioids
(C) inhalants
(D) steroids
- The body's natural opioid system includes special receptors called opioid receptors, which bind natural pain-relieving chemicals as well as prescription opioids. Which of the following is NOT a part of the body where opioid receptors are found?
(A) brain
(B) hair
(C) spinal cord
(D) all of the above
- Before writing a prescription for pain medication, a doctor first evaluates:
(A) any medical conditions you have
(B) any past drug use
(C) other medications you are taking
(D) all of the above
- Opioids include the following drugs:
(A) Vicodin®
(B) Advil®
(C) OxyContin®
(D) A and B
(E) A and C
- Which of the following can be an adverse effect of opioids?
(A) nausea
(B) constipation
(C) overdose
(D) all of the above
- Which of the following is NOT an example of abusing prescription painkillers?
(A) Taking a drug prescribed for you in higher doses than directed
(B) Taking a drug with a friend to get high
(C) Taking a drug prescribed for you according to instructions from your doctor
(D) Taking a drug that was prescribed for your friend
- A doctor monitors safe use of prescription medications by:
(A) giving you warning signs of a bad reaction to look out for
(B) telling you what other drugs you cannot take at the same time as the medication
(C) giving you instructions on how to safely take the medication
(D) all of the above

Image: diamond-shaped road sign. © Alex Stobockin/iStockphoto.