



Opioids and Children

Children who take opioid pain medication not prescribed to them—even just one time—can suffer serious illness, injury, or death.

Millions of children in America are affected by opioid use and its accompanying challenges. Over the past two decades, opiate-related deaths in the U.S.—including those of children—more than quadrupled, with more than 400,000 people dying of overdose or other substance-abuse-related behaviors. There have been 28% more opioid-related deaths nationwide, just since 2015.

Every 25 minutes, a baby is born suffering from opioid withdrawal, which can result in lower birthweights, respiratory conditions, feeding difficulties, seizures, longer hospital stays, and death.

Opioid misuse continues to greatly affect adolescents and young adults in the United States. About 200,000 children under age 18 go to emergency rooms every year because of adverse medicine reactions. Taking prescription pain medications can have serious consequences, including:

- Allergic reactions
- Breathing problems
- Coma
- Permanent brain damage
- Death

It is important for parents and guardians to talk to children about the dangers of taking prescription pain relievers that don't belong to them.

Children need to understand that it is illegal and extremely unsafe to take another person's prescription medication, even if the drug was prescribed to a friend or family member.

Medical professionals prescribe dosages based on an individual's size and age, and taking the wrong strength can be deadly.

Parents also need to talk to their children about how addiction is a disease, and how misusing medications can have major, life-changing consequences.

More than 2 million people in America suffer from an opioid use disorder. Taking prescription opioids long-term—or using them incorrectly—can cause the brain to become dependent on the drug, resulting in addiction.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) opioid prescribing guideline for chronic pain states that there is limited evidence for use in children and adolescents, and the population is outside the scope of the prescribing guidelines.

If your doctor prescribes an opioid drug to your child, be sure to ask the doctor about the risks of prescription pain relievers and the possibility of non-opioid alternatives.

Talk to Your Children About Opioids

Research has shown that one of the most important factors when a child is growing up is a strong, open relationship with a parent. Although it might not seem like it, children really do hear their parents' concerns, and it is important to discuss the risks of using pain medications with them.

Opioids are a group of drugs that includes prescription medications and illegal drugs like heroin. The most common pain medications involved in prescription opioid overdoses include drugs such as oxycodone, hydrocodone, codeine, and morphine.

Many opioids that are commercially available are not appropriate for the pediatric population. As an example, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration issued a black box warning for codeine and tramadol in children younger than 12 years and limited use in children between 12 and 18 years of age, owing to difficulty breathing and death.

Oxymorphone is not routinely recommended for use in pediatric patients, as it carries a black box warning for respiratory depression and other warnings regarding the high risk of addiction, abuse, misuse, overdose, and death.

There are also additional concerns for non-medical use of opioids, including a strong association with heroin initiation.

After marijuana and alcohol, prescription drugs are the most commonly abused substances by Americans aged 14 and older.

Misuse of prescription medication can be described as taking someone else's medicine, taking a medication in a way not prescribed, taking a medicine to get high, and/or mixing medicine with other substances.

Here are some tips on how to talk to your child about the dangers of prescription drug abuse:

- Begin by letting your child know you are always there for them
- Spend time with your child to show you care about his or her health, wellness, and success

- Choose informal times to have conversations, such as in the car or during dinner
- Have many short talks and continually reinforce no use/abuse messages
- Listen for cues that your child is open to talking about important topics, including questions, opinions, and reactions
- When the timing is right, clearly state what you expect regarding drug use
- Create family rules such as expectations when hanging out with friends
- Continue talking to your kids as they get older

Exit Plan

Help your children to create an "exit plan" for when they might be offered prescription pain relievers that are not theirs.

Peer pressure can be very powerful among young people, and having a plan to avoid drug misuse can help children make smart choices.

Talk with your children about what they would do if faced with a decision about drugs, such as texting a code word to a family member. Be sure to practice the exit plan in a safe environment.