

# TEENS & PRESCRIPTION DRUG ABUSE

## A DRUG PROBLEM CLOSE TO HOME



*Opioid medications are the third most common drug abused by Ontario teens.*

*The dangers of taking illicit (illegal) drugs have been known for many years. However, there is an emerging drug abuse issue that involves the use of some legal drugs, specifically opioids.*

### What are opioids?

Opioids are a family of drugs that have morphine-like effects. Their primary medical use is pain relief. Opioids produce a pleasant feeling in our brain. This feeling is often described as a “buzz” or “happy” feeling. Common types of opioids include: Percocet®, Percodan®, Tylenol No. 3 or 4®, codeine, morphine, and OxyContin®.

### What is OxyContin®?

OxyContin® is a brand name for a highly addictive painkiller containing the opioid oxycodone. In addition to relieving pain, OxyContin® quickly delivers pleasant feelings, much like those produced by heroin.

### The emerging issue

For years, heroin was the most common opioid abused in Canada. Over the past several years, Canadian drug use surveys have discovered that the types of drugs used illegally have changed (Fischer, et al, 2006). Today in Canada, the use of street heroin has decreased while the illegal use of prescription opioids, like OxyContin®, has increased.

Since 1977, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health has been conducting the Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey. In 2007, for the first time, the survey asked about prescription opioid abuse among teens. The study found that 21% of students in grades 7 to 12 admitted taking a prescription opioid for non-medical purposes within the previous year. This makes prescription opioids the third most common drug abused after alcohol (61%) and marijuana (26%).

- Females (24%) are more likely than males (18%) to abuse an opioid drug for non-medical purposes.
- Students in grade 7 are least likely to abuse an opioid drug (12%) while those in grade 9 reported the most abuse (24%).
- OxyContin® abuse by teens has doubled since 2005.
- Secondary school students in the Erie St. Clair Region (Essex, Lambton, and Kent) report a higher abuse rate of OxyContin® and other opioid drugs compared to other Ontario students (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2007). See table on the back.

## Opioid Drug Abuse Among Grade 7 to 12 Students

	Erie St. Clair Region	Ontario
Opioid drug abuse	29%	22%
OxyContin® abuse	5%	2%

### 2007 Opioid Drug Abuse By Grade Reported by Ontario High School Students

Grade 7 - 12%	Grade 9 - 24%	Grade 11 - 22%
Grade 8 - 22%	Grade 10 - 21%	Grade 12 - 20%

Some youth have turned to taking prescription opioids for non-medical purposes because they can be easy to access. They also assume that since they are legal and prescribed by a doctor, they are safe. That is not true. Abusing prescription opioids can have tragic consequences from serious injury to death. These are powerful drugs that can have unpredictable effects when abused because some teens:

- Take more than one kind of drug at the same time.
- Are unaware of the kind of drug they are abusing.
- Drink alcohol and take drugs at the same time.

Abusing opioids can be very dangerous because consuming large amounts can slow breathing. An overdose can cause death.

### Keep track of your prescription drugs, specifically opioids

In the U.S., 62% of teens aged 12 to 17 years old reported getting their opioid drugs from their parent's medicine cabinets (ONDCPEOP, 2007). It probably isn't that different for Canadian youth. In Canada, physicians prescribe more opioids than physicians in any other country (CAMH, 2008). Easy access to opioids is a major issue for our teens. Help reduce the risk for opioid abuse in your home.

#### References:

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To ensure you aren't part of this serious and growing problem, consider the following...

### Tips for reducing the risk of teen opioid abuse

- Keep opioid and all other drugs in a safe and secure place. Lock them in a security box or cabinet.
- Keep track of the number of pills in a container. If the number of pills doesn't seem to match your normal use or you need to refill your prescription more often than expected, there may be someone taking your drugs.
- Set house rules about safe prescription drug use. Make sure everyone in the home is aware of the rules and the consequences for breaking them.
- As a parent, grandparent, or guardian, be a positive role model and demonstrate safe prescription drug behaviours yourself. Always follow directions on the drug container. Call your pharmacist or physician with questions.
- At least once a year, clean out your medicine cabinet and bring medications that are no longer needed or expired to your pharmacist for safe disposal.
- Spread the word. Ask your friends and family to help reduce the risk of prescription drug abuse and put these tips into action in their home (Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America, 2008).

Education and controlled access can help reduce the risk for teen opioid abuse. To learn more, visit the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health website at [www.camh.net](http://www.camh.net).