



Over-the-counter and prescription drugs

When you think about drug use and young people, drugs like alcohol or cannabis might quickly come to mind. What we know from recent surveys is that the misuse of over-the-counter and prescription drugs is becoming a problem with some young people. These drugs when taken as intended by appropriately following the instructions provided by a doctor, pharmacist or the instructions on the packet, can safely treat specific symptoms.

It is when over-the-counter or prescribed drugs are misused by taking them when symptoms aren't present or by taking increased doses that these drugs, just as with alcohol and illicit drugs, have the potential to cause harm and may affect a person in ways very similar to illicit drugs.

As stated above, the harms associated with pharmaceuticals are not just related to the misuse of prescription drugs but also the misuse of over-the-counter drugs. For example, the reports of misuse of analgesics (eg that contain codeine) are increasing and this is emerging as an issue of concern.

Misusing codeine, including taking more codeine than recommended on the packet, increases the risk of side effects such as dizziness, lethargy and blurred vision, and puts a person at risk of an overdose. Care should be taken when using these drugs including those that contain paracetamol, as overuse of this drug can result in death.



National Drug Strategy Household Survey

National Drug Strategy Household Survey¹ results showed that of those 14 -19 year olds surveyed;

- ▶ 64% had used over-the-counter pain killers/analgesics in the last 12 months
- ▶ 60.5% had used prescription pain killers/analgesics in the last 12 months
- ▶ 32.3% had used pharmaceuticals for non-medical purposes daily or weekly in the last 12 months
- ▶ 37.2% had used pharmaceuticals for non-medical purposes once or twice a year in the last 12 months
- ▶ 3.7% of females and 4.4% of males used pharmaceuticals for non-medical purposes.



Messages to give your children

- ▶ **All drugs have the potential to cause harm** including over-the-counter and prescription medications. Some young people may think that prescription and over-the-counter drugs are safer than other drugs because they are legal and prescribed by a doctor, or can be purchased from a pharmacy or supermarket.
- ▶ **These drugs should only be used as directed.** Young people who do not think that using prescription and over-the-counter drugs is harmful may be more likely to use them for non-medical reasons than those who view them as harmful.
- ▶ **Using pharmaceutical drugs without a prescription** from a doctor, or selling or giving them to someone else is illegal. It is also against the law to forge or alter a prescription.
- ▶ **Try alternatives before using medications.** Talk about alternative ways your children can relieve a headache before taking analgesics such as: eating food or drinking water to hydrate the body or lying down in a dark room with a cold compress across the forehead or back of the neck, or going for a walk and getting some fresh air. (These are suggestions only and should not be taken as medical advice).

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (2014). National Drug Strategy Household Survey detailed report 2013. Drug statistics series no. 28. Cat. no. PHE 183. Canberra: AIHW. Retrieved from <http://www.aihw.gov.au/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=60129549848>