

'PHARM' PARTIES

By Larry Eldridge – CWK Network, Inc.



“We all had different prescriptions – *18-year-old Laura*”

“You know, Percocets, Valium, Xanax, Oxycontin – *James, 21*”

James and Laura met in rehab. Both are drug addicts who used to get high at parties — parties where everyone brought some kind of prescription drug and passed them around, often combining them with marijuana or alcohol.

“When I first started using and mixing drugs, I felt like a superhero, like nothing, you know, I was invincible,” says Laura.

Some kids call them “pharm” parties... for “pharmaceutical”. Experts say the allure is... the unknown. “What kind of new experience can I get? And very often it’s kids who are just bored of smoking pot day in and day out... because they’ve reached a saturation point,” says Addiction Counselor Robert Margolis, Ph.D.

But experts say taking someone else’s prescription is dangerous, especially when combined with other drugs. There are combinations out there such that if you start to mix them together will create reactions in your body that by the time you know what’s happening, it’s too late, says Dr. Margolis.

“What I did notice is that I would black out a lot of nights,” says James.

Laura survived her drug years, but her addiction led to mood swings and depression that made her suicidal. “Once I started getting heavily addicted, I tried overdosing several times, so I wanted to die, I didn’t want to live anymore,” she says.

“The risks are immense and they don’t realize that,” says Dr. Margolis, “and they include everything from having a tremendous hangover to fatal.”

RELATED INFORMATION

“Pharm” parties are just the latest example of a trend that seems to be skyrocketing. A study from the Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration reveals that non-medical use of pain relievers and tranquilizers is at a record high, with nearly 3 million youth aged 12 to 17 admitting their abuse of prescription drugs. The findings also show that the number of young people abusing prescription drugs has risen as much as 500 percent since the mid-1980s. Consider these additional statistics from the survey:

- New users of stimulants increased from more than 200,000 in 1991 to almost 700,000 in 2000.
- New users of tranquilizers have been increasing since the mid-1980s, but the largest increase has been recently, from more than 700,000 new users in 1999 to almost 1 million users in 2000.
- The number of new users of sedatives remained around 100,000 per year between 1988 and 1994. Starting in 1995, the number rose from 111,000 to 175,000 in 2000.
- Between 1998 and 2000, new users of pain relievers among 12- to 17-year-olds outnumbered those among 18- to 25-year-olds.
- Among youth (aged 12 to 17), females were more likely to have used prescription-type drugs non-medically in the past year (9 percent) compared to males (7 percent). However, among young adults (aged 18 to 25), males were more likely to have used them in the past year (14 percent) compared to females (10 percent).
- Among youth, whites (12 percent) were more likely to have used prescription-type drugs non-medically in the past year compared to Hispanics (8 percent), blacks (6 percent), or Asians (5 percent).
- Youths in non-metropolitan or small metropolitan areas were more likely to have used prescription-type drugs non-medically in the past year (9 percent) compared to youths in large metropolitan areas (7 percent).

A companion report from the Drug Abuse Warning Network also points to an alarming trend in drug use. It shows that hospitals logged 90,000 visits for opiate abuse – a 117 percent rise over the number of visits in 1994.

WHAT PARENTS NEED TO KNOW

As a parent, it is important to understand that teens may be involved with legal and illegal drugs in various ways. The American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) reports that many teens begin using drugs to satisfy their curiosity, to make themselves feel good, to reduce stress, to feel grown up or to “fit in.” While it is difficult to know which teens will experiment and stop and which will develop serious problems, the National Institute of Drug Abuse says the following types of teens are at greatest risk of becoming addicted:

- Those who have a family history of substance abuse
- Those who are depressed
- Those who have low self-esteem
- Those who feel they don’t “fit in” or are out of the mainstream

Because the U.S. Food and Drug Administration puts its seal of approval on prescription drugs, many teens mistakenly believe that using these drugs — even if they are not prescribed to them — is safe. However, this misconception can, in fact, lead to addiction and severe side effects. The Center for Drug Evaluation and Research names the following most commonly abused prescription drugs:

- Opioids – Also known as narcotic analgesics, opioids are used to treat pain. Examples of this type of drug include morphine, codeine, OxyContin (oxycodone), Vicodin (hydrocodone), and Demerol (meperidine). In the short term, these drugs block pain messages and cause drowsiness. A large, single dose can cause severe respiratory depression and death. Long-term use leads to physical dependence and, in some cases, addiction.
- Central nervous system (CNS) depressants – These drugs are commonly used to treat anxiety, panic attacks and sleep disorders. Examples include Nembutal (pentobarbital sodium), Valium (diazepam), and Xanax (alprazolam). CNS depressants slow down normal brain function and can cause a sleepy, uncoordinated feeling in the beginning of treatment. Long-term use can lead to physical dependence and addiction.

- Stimulants – These drugs are commonly used to treat the sleeping disorder narcolepsy and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. Examples include Ritalin (methylphenidate) and Dexedrine (dextroamphetamine). Stimulants, which can be addictive, enhance brain activity and increase alertness and energy. They elevate blood pressure, heart rate, and respiration. Very high doses can lead to irregular heartbeat and high body temperature

How can you determine if your teen is abusing drugs? The AACAP suggests looking for the following warning signs and symptoms in your teen:

- Physical – Fatigue, repeated health complaints, red and glazed eyes and a lasting cough
- Emotional – Personality change, sudden mood changes, irritability, irresponsible behavior, low self-esteem, poor judgment, depression and a general lack of interest
- Familial – Starting arguments, breaking rules or withdrawing from the family
- School-related – Decreased interest, negative attitude, drop in grades, many absences, truancy and discipline problems
- Social – Having new friends who are less interested in standard home and school activities, problems with the law, and changes to less conventional styles in dress and music

If you believe your teen has a problem with drug abuse, you can take several steps to get the help he or she needs. The American Academy of Family Physicians suggests contacting your healthcare provider so that he or she can perform an adequate medical evaluation in order to match the right treatment or intervention program with your teen. You can also contact a support group in your community dedicated to helping families coping with addiction and drug abuse.

Substance abuse can be an overwhelming issue with which to deal, but it doesn’t have to be. The Partnership for a Drug-Free America offers the following strategies to put into practice so that your teen can reap the rewards of a healthy, drug-free life:

- Be your teen’s greatest fan. Compliment him or her on all of his or her efforts, strength of character and individuality.
- Encourage your teen to get involved in adult-supervised after-school activities. Ask him or her what types of activities he or she is interested in and contact the school principal or guidance counselor to find out what activities are available. Sometimes it takes a bit of experimenting to find out which activities your teen is best suited for, but it’s worth the effort — feeling competent makes children much less likely to use drugs.
- Help your teen develop tools he can use to get out of drug-related situations. Let him know you can be used as an excuse: “My mom would kill me if I smoked marijuana!”
- Get to know your teen’s friends and their parents. Set appointments for yourself to call them and check in to make sure they share your views on alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. Steer your teen away from any friends who use drugs, if you can.
- Call teens’ parents if their home is to be used for a party. Make sure that the party will be drug-free and supervised by adults.
- Set curfews and enforce them. Let your teen know the consequences of breaking your curfew.
- Set a no-use rule for alcohol, tobacco, and drugs.
- Sit down for dinner with your teen *at least once* a week. Use the time to talk – don’t eat in front of a television set.
- Get – and stay – involved in your teen’s life. 🍷

RESOURCES

Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration
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American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry
National Institute on Drug Abuse
U.S. Food and Drug Administration
Center for Drug Evaluation and Research
American Academy of Family Physicians
Partnership for a Drug-Free America