

Prescription Drugs That Kill By John R. Christensen

I recently handled a tragic case involving a registered nurse and mother of two children who died from an accidental overdose of prescription pain killers. Of all people, you would think a medical professional would appreciate the dangers of these types of drugs. However, the fact that she knew the drugs were dangerous just goes to show the power of addiction, and the death grip pain pills such as Oxycontin and Oxycodone can have on people.

This is not the first drug overdose case I have handled at the MBC Law Firm, and because of the wide spread abuse of certain drugs, it sadly won't be the last. That is why MBC is working with the Washington State Attorney General, Rob McKenna, to help get the word out and educate the public about the dangers of prescription pain medications. Hopefully this public safety initiative will help save lives.

In 2008, more than 500 people lost their lives to accidental drug overdoses involving prescription drugs. The unused or expired painkillers found in our medicine cabinets are contributing to the problem.

Users are mixing them with alcohol or other drugs. Some people even snort them or shoot them up for a quicker, sometimes fatal high.

The most commonly abused prescription drugs are:

Opioids, such as, OxyContin, Vicodin, and Demerol. Abuse of drugs such as these can lead to vomiting, mood changes, decreased ability to think, and even decreased respiratory function, coma, or death. This risk is higher when opioids are taken with alcohol or other drugs.

CNS Depressants, like, Nembutal, Valium, and Xanax. Abruptly stopping or reducing these types of drugs too quickly can lead to seizures, and taking them with other medications, such as prescription painkillers, some over-the-counter cold and allergy medications, or alcohol can slow a person's heartbeat and breathing, enough to kill.

Use of **Stimulants**, such as Ritalin and Adderall, could lead to heart failure or seizures. The risks are increased when stimulants are mixed with other medicines. Also, taking too much can cause dangerously high body temperature or an irregular heartbeat. Taking several high doses over a short period of time may cause overly aggressive behavior or paranoia. And though these may not lead to physical dependence and withdrawal, these drugs can cause people to become habitual users, creating an addiction that's hard to break.

Chronic users, teenagers, even normal every day people are getting hooked and overdosing on prescription drugs. This kind of abuse could be caused by the fact that prescription drugs are more accessible these days through friends, family, and online pharmacies.

It has become such a serious problem that the [DEA](#) sponsored a national "Take Back" campaign in which citizens could drop off their unused or expired drugs from their medicine cabinets, no questions asked. The DEA also urges consumers to check, lock, and properly dispose of prescription drugs from time to time. The best way to dispose of these drugs, unless otherwise stated on the label, is in the trash.

Here are some prescription drugs facts from the DEA:

- Nearly 7 million Americans are abusing prescription drugs*—more than the number who are abusing cocaine, heroin, hallucinogens, Ecstasy, and inhalants, combined. That 7 million was just 3.8 million in 2000, an 80 percent increase in just 6 years.
- Prescription pain relievers are new drug users' drug of choice, vs. marijuana or cocaine.
- Opioid painkillers now cause more drug overdose deaths than cocaine and heroin combined.
- Nearly 1 in 10 high school seniors admits to abusing powerful prescription painkillers. A shocking 40 percent of teens and an almost equal number of their parents think abusing prescription painkillers is safer than abusing "street" drugs.
- Misuse of painkillers represents three-fourths of the overall problem of prescription drug abuse; hydrocodone is the most commonly diverted and abused controlled pharmaceutical in the U.S.
- Twenty-five percent of drug-related emergency department visits are associated with abuse of prescription drugs.
- Methods of acquiring prescription drugs for abuse include "doctor-shopping," traditional drug-dealing, theft from pharmacies or homes, illicitly acquiring prescription drugs via the Internet, and from friends or relatives.
- DEA works closely with the medical community to help them recognize drug abuse and signs of diversion and relies on their input and due diligence to combat diversion. Doctor involvement in illegal drug activity is rare—less than one tenth of one percent of more than 750,000 doctors are the subject of DEA investigations each year—but egregious drug violations by practitioners unfortunately do sometimes occur. DEA pursues criminal action against such practitioners.
- DEA Internet drug trafficking initiatives over the past 3 years have identified and dismantled organizations based both in the U.S. and overseas, and arrested dozens of conspirators. As a result of major investigations such as Operations Web Tryp, PharmNet, Cyber Rx, Cyber Chase, and Click 4 Drugs, Bay Watch, and Lightning Strike, tens of millions of dosage units of prescription drugs and tens of millions of dollars in assets have been seized.

Remember, never use drugs that aren't prescribed to you and check your medicine cabinet periodically for unused or expired drugs. If you or someone you know is addicted, seek help immediately. You could be saving a life. It could be your own.

If you have any questions about any prescription drugs you find at home or elsewhere, please contact your doctor or the poison control center. If you or a loved one has suffered injury or death because of addiction to prescription medications, please call me at the MBC Law Firm.

Sources:

http://www.justice.gov/dea/concern/prescription_drug_fact_sheet.html

http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/drugfact/prescr_drg_abuse.html

http://kidshealth.org/teen/drug_alcohol/drugs/prescription_drug_abuse.html

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/prescriptiondrugabuse.html>