

Prescription Drug Abuse: Drugs, Doctors and Teens  
Megan Reavis  
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He had surgery for a broken leg. That's when "Colt" says his prescription drug abuse began. This 24-year-old Greenville man—we'll call him "Colt"—is not alone. The Drug Enforcement Administration reports that in 2005 6.4 million people, ages 12 and up, used prescription drug for nonmedical purposes in a given month's time.

Like Colt, who was prescribed Vicodin, 4.7 million abusers relied on narcotic pain relievers for their fix, according to the 2005 study. Colt says he built up a tolerance for the drug after being prescribed Vicodin for over a year.

Detective J.G. Pinner of the Pitt County Sheriff's Office says many dependencies begin like Colt's. Pinner says when a person is prescribed a painkiller because of a broken bone, the individual feels better and wants that feeling to continue even though his or her bottle is empty.

Pinner says if users are unable to get a higher dosage from their doctor, some will go to another doctor and then to another when that prescription runs out. This is referred to as "doctor shopping."

"I personally know 10 to 20 people who all go to different doctors, sometimes multiple doctors, to get their monthly supply," says Colt.

But as some abusers travel to different physicians for their refills, others don't have to go so far. Colt, who abused prescription drug from the age of 18 until he was 23, says although he got prescription drugs from numerous sources, he relied heavily on one doctor. "All you had to do was pay for the doctor visit, bring an MRI and the doctor would prescribe you OxyContin," says Colt.

Disciplinary records from January 2004 to June 2008 of the North Carolina Medical Board show that 102 out of the 558 disciplined doctors were reported to have improperly prescribed prescriptions to patients, family members or themselves.

Colt says it was shocking to find a prescription could be so easily attained. "It was surprisingly easy to get a 160 pill prescription every month for 80mg of OxyContin, and that's what really kept my addiction growing," says Colt.

Although some doctors prescribe illegally, Pinner says most of the action falls to the individuals abusing the drugs. According to Pinner, the majority of cases involve abusers altering prescriptions. The most common modification is adding extra numbers to their original amount to increase the dosage. Pinner says many users use a cut and paste method to get their drugs. "They cut out a one or a zero and then put it on the prescription to make it look like they are supposed to have more pills," Pinner says. Other methods

used to alter prescriptions include using labels or creating prescription pads on the computer and then filling them out.

Pinner says some resort to stealing prescription pads and writing their own drug remedy. Many others telephone pharmacies, posing as doctors. "These guys are smart; they know all of the generic names and the milligram dosages," says Pinner.

When these methods don't work, some abusers result to robbing pharmacies. Just last year, a man stole prescription drugs from the CVS Pharmacy on Memorial Drive in Greenville, by handing employees a note that led them to believe the man had a gun. The man stole OxyContin and methadone, a narcotic used to prevent withdrawal symptoms of heroin addicts.

While some prescription drug abusers trick pharmacists into supplying them with drugs, Pinner says most pharmacists can spot an abuser and inform law enforcement quickly. "Pharmacists know pretty much from the get go that these people are frauds," he says. Pharmacists often contribute to the sheriff's office's biggest busts by calling in and reporting forged prescriptions, according to Pinner.

Despite the many pharmacists who work with the authorities, some go against the law. In 2007 the North Carolina Board of Pharmacy conducted an investigation into a pharmacy technician from Nash County named Morgan B. Jones.

Jones worked at Almand's Drug, where the Nash County Sheriff's Office had an informant buying Alprazolam, a drug commonly used to treat anxiety. According to the Drug Enforcement Administration, Alprezolam is abused to get high and is often used with multiple drugs.

On April 3, 2007, a third buy was arranged between Jones and the informant and took place in the Almand's Drug parking lot. The informant text messaged Jones, who went out of the pharmacy and got into her vehicle and then returned to the pharmacy. The sheriff's department then obtained a search warrant and found approximately 2,000 dosage units of Alprazolam.

Jones was then arrested and eventually pled guilty to federal charges. After her arrest, the pharmacy board conducted an audit of Alprazolam 1mg, at Almand's Drug, for the time of May 1, 2005 through April 3, 2007. From their assessment they found 108,981 drug units had been diverted during this period and 11,769 drug units were legitimately dispensed.

Although some abusers get their prescriptions illegally from pharmacy employees, most teenagers access their drugs through a medicine cabinet. The Partnership Attitude Tracking Study, which tracks attitudes about prescription drugs, reports that in 2006, over three in five teens ages 12 to 17 say prescription pain relievers are easily accessible from their parents' medicine cabinets.

According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, friends are the next most highly used source for prescription drugs. In 2006 the survey reported that 47 percent of teens say they get prescription drugs from their friends for free.

Pain relievers such as OxyContin and Vicodin are the most abused type of prescription drugs by teens, according to the drug use survey. The Office of National Drug Control Policy shows that in 2005, 2.1 million teenagers abused prescription drugs.

A recent story by WITN, a news station in eastern North Carolina, says health studies show that high school students in the western part of the state are more likely to abuse prescription drugs than anywhere else in North Carolina.

Pinner says the reason for the high percentage of prescription drug abuse by teens comes from a false perception that they are safe. "If doctors know how to make you feel better, why not take a pill or two?" says Pinner, referring to a common response by teens abusing these drugs.

The Office of National Drug Control Policy agrees with Pinner. In 2007 the policy reported teens are attracted to abusing prescription drugs because they provide what is perceived as a "medically safe high."

In addition to believing prescription drugs are harmless, teens also abuse due to peer pressure, according to a 2006 Seventeen magazine article. The article explains 9 percent of teens say using these drugs to get high is an important part of fitting in with their friends.

Pinner says teens share these drugs with friends and the process is seen as a bonding experience.

At one point in his life, Colt says he and many of his friends would get together and share all the different types of drugs they had collected.

Many of these small gatherings with friends like Colt's can eventually lead to much larger groups coming together. "Pharm Parties" are parties where a large number of teens get together and share and exchange prescription drugs in order to get intoxicated. According to Pinner, these parties occur in secret locations, usually in the middle of nowhere.

Although no pharm parties have been broken up by the Pitt County Sheriff's Office, reports of these parties are enough to have many agencies on the lookout. Pinner says law enforcement knows pharm parties are out there, but they just have no physical evidence to back up the reports as of yet. "If you have a place that only certain people know about, you're not going to go bragging to the police about it," Pinner said.

With teens' constant exposure to prescription drugs, many are becoming dependant, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. In 2006

the agency reported that 15.9 percent of teens between ages 12 and 17 have become dependent on prescription drugs in the past year. The agency also reports that abusing prescription drugs for the first time before age 16 leads to a greater risk of dependency later on in life.

But as these reports become more prevalent, some teens and young adults are beginning to realize the dangers of prescription drug abuse.

Colt says his arrest changed his perspective on prescription drugs. While at a party one night, police came and found Colt with various types of pills. He was arrested for possession of a controlled substance, but with a help of a lawyer, only performed community service and was on probation.

Colt made the decision to stop taking prescription drugs altogether after seeing the negative effects it had on some of his friends. “These pills can ruin lives, and they almost ruined mine,” Colt says.

Andrew Herndon and C.J. Wilson contributed to the reporting of this story.