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Prescription Drug Abuse Among the Disabled

As of 2006, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office on Disability estimated that 4.7 million adults experienced a substance abuse problem in addition to living with a disability. Among the most commonly abused substances are prescription medications, particularly pain medications. In this resource document, you'll learn more about why people with disabilities are more at risk of prescription drug abuse, how to detect if you or a loved one have a problem with prescription drug abuse, and how you can get help to live a more sober, healthier life.

What is prescription drug abuse?

- Using medications not prescribed for you
- Taking a medication in a way other than prescribed (taking too much, too often)
- Taking a medication to get high



Why are people with disabilities at greater risk?

The reasons for why people with disabilities are more at risk of substance abuse are many, but they may include: chronic pain, mental illness such as depression, unemployment, problems with self-esteem, mobility issues, sleep disorders, social isolation, enabling by caregivers, and easier access to prescription medications. Not only do these factors put someone with a disability at risk, but they also make it harder to seek treatment and increase a person's chance of relapsing.



Medications that reduce or treat pain are the most commonly abused prescription drugs. Prescription opioids (e.g. Vicodin and OxyContin), are very effective at eliminating pain, but they are also highly addictive and can cause complex health problems over time. Though some people living with pain are now turning to more alternative treatments, such as prescription marijuana, the long-term effects and addictiveness of these options are not fully known. Sleeping pills and antidepressants are also frequently abused given their sedative and relaxing effects; thus, they are prescribed with caution.

Furthermore, the National Association on Alcohol, Drugs, and Disability, has identified individuals who are deaf as those being most at risk of having a drug or alcohol abuse problem — with 1 in 7 people who are deaf having a problem with substance abuse. The lack of training among interpreters on drug use terminology has made it even harder for the deaf to seek treatment. In addition to those who are deaf, people with spinal cord injuries (SCI) and traumatic brain disorders, are significantly more likely to abuse prescription drugs and alcohol. Approximately 1 in 2 people with an SCI have a substance abuse problem. Another group includes amputees, who are perhaps most vulnerable at becoming addicted to pain medications due to the long and painful recovery associated with losing a limb.

Signs of Prescription Drug Abuse

The signs may vary from person to person, but can include:

- Keeping bottles of prescription pain killers after recovering from surgery, even when pain is no longer present;
- Carrying a full bottle of medicine instead of carrying a pill box that contains only the amount needed for the day/week;
- Requesting frequent refills or doing so ahead of the refill date;
- Becoming anxious when prescriptions are not filled in time or arguing with pharmacy staff over prescription availability;
- Mixing medications with other prescription drugs or alcohol;
- Prescription bottles running low too soon, indicating that more than the doctor's suggested dose is being consumed;
- Feeling like the dosage or prescription frequency is not enough, or taking a pill sooner than what's indicated on the bottle;
- Asking a physician for an increase in dosage or a specific type of prescription.



When it's time to get help



If your doctor or loved one has pointed out to you that your use of prescription medicines is not typical, you need to take their advice seriously and seek help. You may feel shame or disbelief associated with your actions, and those are normal responses — but relying on medications to the degree that you have become addicted to them is not normal. Don't try telling yourself that you can quit or get better on your own; not only is this unlikely, but it may also be dangerous to your health. Some prescription drugs must be tapered over time, as the withdrawal effects can be severe. Work with your doctor on finding what is the best route for you to become sober. Be open to different options, including participating in a prescription drug addiction program. You CAN become sober and live a healthier life.

Prevention Tips

If you do not have a prescription drug abuse problem, but want to take steps in preventing your prescription usage from becoming an addiction issue, here are some general tips.

- **Keep a pill box and have someone else refill it, if necessary.** That way you only allow yourself access to the prescriptions at hand.
- **Use a prescription reminder app or alarm.** By sticking to a schedule, you will be less tempted to reach for a pain pill ahead of your next dose.
- **Keep a medication journal.** Track how often you take a prescription. Perhaps you've been prescribed a pain or sleeping pill to use upon occasion or "when needed," but you find yourself using it more often than not. By jotting down when you take it and how you feel, you'll have a better idea of whether you're becoming dependent on this medication.
- **Know your prescription side effects.** Some medications are more addictive than others, such as prescriptions for pain or sleep. If you notice any new or worsening behaviors or thoughts, talk to your doctor right away.
- **Keep medications away from children, teens, and the elderly.** The last thing you want is for someone to have access to your prescription medications, and become addicted to or even overdose on them. Families with relatives that have addictive pasts should consider keeping prescription medications in a locked drawer or safe.



The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has set guidelines for certain medications that are considered controlled substances. If your prescription is listed as one of them, your pharmacy will inform you of regulations set forth that help prevent drug abuse, such as in-person prescription drop-off or limited number of refills.

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