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Use as Directed:

Preventing Prescription Drug Overdoses

Introduction

Every year, millions of people use prescription medications safely to treat illnesses or to prevent disease complications. Most people use prescription medications as directed. However, the rate of prescription misuse in the United States has increased in the past several years.

In 2021, more than 106,000 people in the U.S. died from drug-involved overdoses. This figure includes overdoses from illicit drugs or from prescription medications. The number of overdose deaths involving prescription drugs such as opioids, stimulants, benzodiazepines, or antidepressants has increased steadily since 2014. Prescription opioids were involved in 16,706 of the drug-involved overdose deaths in 2021.

Common Prescription Drugs Involved in Overdoses

There are risks of harm if prescription medications are not used as prescribed by a healthcare provider. The majority of deaths from use of prescription drugs happen by accident. The most common prescription medications involved in overdoses are listed below.

Type	Used to Treat	Examples of Prescriptions (generic name/trade name)
Opioids	Pain	Oxycodone (Roxicodone, Oxycontin) Methadone (Dolophine, Amidone) Morphine (Avinza)
Benzodiazepines	Anxiety Panic attacks Insomnia Depression	Alprazolam (Xanax) Diazepam (Valium) Lorazepam (Ativan)
Stimulants	Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder Narcolepsy	Amphetamine/Dextroamphetamine (Adderall) Methylphenidate (Ritalin)



Tips to Prevent Accidental Prescription Drug Overdoses

Use the following tips to help prevent accidental overdoses of prescription medications.

- Always read the label on the prescription bottle. Never take more medicine than your healthcare provider has directed.
- Some medications can have harmful interactions with other medications or foods. Talk to your healthcare provider about how your medications may interact, including prescriptions and over-the-counter medications.
- If you are using a liquid medication, use the measuring tool provided by the pharmacy. Do not use silverware or dosing devices intended for other medications.
- Store all medications in a safe place away from children and pets.
- Do not share prescription medications with anyone.
- Use medication boxes to organize daily medications. This will help prevent taking more than the prescribed amount of medication.
- Do not mix alcohol with prescription pain pills, anxiety medications, acetaminophen (Tylenol), or medications for attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Signs and Symptoms of a Prescription Drug Overdose

It is important to know the signs and symptoms that someone has taken too much medication.

Symptoms can vary depending on the prescription drug an individual has used. Some prescription drugs can slow down the body, while others can speed it up. The most common signs and symptoms of prescription drug overdose include:

- abnormal pupil size
- difficulty breathing
- unconsciousness
- hallucinations
- excessive drowsiness
- nausea/vomiting
- excessive sweating
- seizures
- confusion
- unsteadiness

If You Suspect a Drug Overdose . . .

- Call 9-1-1 immediately.
- If the person does not have a pulse, and you are trained to perform basic life support, start CPR.
- Try to determine what drug or drugs the person took.
- Give any drug containers found, such as prescription medication bottles, to the emergency responders.

Sources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2023). Medication safety program.

<https://www.cdc.gov/medication-safety/about/index.html>

National Institute on Drug Abuse (2023). Drug overdose death rates.

https://nida.nih.gov/research-topics/trends-statistics/overdose-death-rates?_ga=2.93184858.698653021.1687789404-1121129611.1686785840