

# The Misuse of Prescription Pain Medicine Among Children and Teens

**Prescription pain relievers include narcotics, depressants, and stimulants.**

These medications are often prescribed to adults after surgery or after some other medical procedure; in 2012, 259 million prescriptions for painkillers were written. Deaths from an overdose of prescription drugs have dramatically increased over the last 20 years and are now a leading cause of injury death. Having these medications around the house poses risks to children and adolescents. Each year, thousands of children are hospitalized—and some die—after taking medication that was not meant for them. Young children may take medicine that they find around the house because it looks like candy. Adolescents may take prescription medications that were not meant for them, and some of these adolescents then share these stolen prescription drugs at “pharm parties.”

The most dangerous prescription pain relievers are those containing drugs called opioids, such as morphine or codeine. Examples of these types of drugs include Darvon, Dilaudid, OxyContin, Tylenol with Codeine, and Vicodin. Children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable to prescription opioid misuse and overdose because these drugs are often prescribed to adults; many adults do not finish all the medication and leave pill bottles in accessible locations in the home. Nearly all accidental ingestions of opioids by children are due to family members leaving their medication in accessible locations in the home. Half of the adolescents who misuse prescription opioids get them from past prescriptions that belonged to them, a family member, or a friend, and 8% share these prescriptions with others.

A study in this month's *JAMA Pediatrics* looks at whether or not patients actually took all the opioid medication prescribed to them. The researchers found that less than half of patients took the full amount of medication. The research study concluded that reducing the amounts of prescription pain medications that are prescribed would help reduce the amounts of leftover medications that may be found or misused by children and adolescents.

If you are prescribed a prescription pain medication and do not use the full amount, it is important to dispose of the extra medication safely. The Drug Enforcement Administration and local law enforcement hold National Prescription Drug Take-Back Days, and some communities have permanent take-back locations that provide a safe and responsible means of drug disposal. If no medicine take-back program is available in your area, you can follow a few simple steps to dispose of most medicines in the household trash. These include mixing the medicine with a substance that is unpalatable, such as kitty litter or coffee grounds, and putting that mixture in a plastic bag before putting it in the garbage.

It is important for any adult who cares for children or adolescents, including parents, grandparents, relatives, or friends, to ensure that



medications such as prescription pain medicine are stored safely. The US Food and Drug Administration recommends locking up medications (such as opioids) that are dangerous to children in a medication lockbox. If you are concerned that your child or adolescent has taken a prescription pain medication, call 911. Symptoms of overdose include slow breathing, small “pinpoint” pupils, confusion, being tired or nodding off, dizziness, weakness, cold skin, nausea, vomiting, and seizures.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

About Storing Medications Safely

<http://www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/ucm272905.htm>

About Disposal of Unused Medication

<http://www.fda.gov/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/BuyingUsingMedicineSafely/EnsuringSafeUseofMedicine/SafeDisposalofMedicines/ucm186187.htm>

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**Author:** Megan A. Moreno, MD, MSEd, MPH

**Correction:** This article was corrected on May 27, 2015, for an error in the text.

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