

Study: Misuse of prescription drugs linked to risky sexual behavior

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Teenagers who misused prescription drugs were more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors than their peers who did not use such medications improperly, according to a new study.

Researchers from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) say such behaviors can lead to unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections.

They detailed their findings in the new report “Non-medical Use of Prescription Drugs and Sexual Risk Behaviors” (Clayton HB, et al. *Pediatrics*. Dec. 14, 2015, www.pediatrics.org/cgi/doi/10.1542/peds.2015-2480) in which they analyzed data from the 2011 and 2013 national Youth Risk Behavior Surveys.

Previous studies have linked substance use and sexual risk behavior, but CDC researchers wanted to look specifically at nonmedical use of prescription drugs (NMUPD) since nearly one in five teens has engaged in this behavior, according to lead author Heather B. Clayton, Ph.D., M.P.H., a health scientist for the CDC.

Students taking the anonymous surveys were asked whether they had taken a prescription drug without a doctor’s prescription. They also were asked about numerous sexual risk behaviors like having sex without a condom and having intercourse with four or more partners in their lifetime.

The study compared sexual risk behaviors of teens who engage in NMUPD to peers who did not misuse such drugs and found:

- 76.6% of teens who engaged in NMUPD had sexual intercourse compared to 39.9% of peers;
- 35.8% of teens who engaged in NMUPD had four or more lifetime sexual partners compared to 10.1% of peers;
- 48.2% of sexually active teens who engaged in NMUPD did not use a condom at last sexual intercourse compared to 35.8% of peers;
- 38% of sexually active teens who engaged in NMUPD used alcohol or drugs before last sexual intercourse compared to 14% of peers;
- NMUPD for males was linked to every sexual risk behavior in the survey, while for females it was linked to all except not using a condom;
- NMUPD was significantly associated with all sexual risk behaviors in the survey for white students and nearly all such behaviors for Hispanic students but only alcohol or drug use before sex for black students; and
- as frequency of NMUPD increased, so did its link with risky sexual behaviors.

The study had several limitations, including that the survey did not include street names for prescription drugs, account for legitimate prescriptions being misused or include teens who are not in school.

Dr. Clayton recommended physicians counsel patients about the risks involved with risky sexual behavior as well as certain prescription medications. She pointed to the CDC's advice (1.usa.gov/1Tfm6sG) that doctors prescribe the lowest effective dose of painkillers, avoid combinations of opioids and sedatives, and talk to patients about how to use, store, stop and dispose of the drugs properly.

Resources

- [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#)
- [AAP News story "Study: Prescription opioid use in teens associated with future misuse"](#)
- [AAP News story "Opioid prescribing in children requires multipronged approach"](#)
- [AAP policy "Substance Use Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment for Pediatricians"](#),
- [AAP policy "Contraception for Adolescents"](#)
- [AAP News story "Addressing adolescent sexual health"](#)
- [AAP News story "Treatment guidelines for STDs"](#)
- [Information for teens on making healthy sexual decisions](#)

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