

Greenwich Time

Prescription drug abuse has health advocates on alert

By Christina Hennessy
Staff Writer

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A false sense of security can lead to a dangerous situation when it comes to teenagers' misuse of prescription drugs.

There is a perception, says Dr. Kasey Spoonamore, that prescription and over-the-counter drugs are safer than illegal drugs.

These often include pain relievers or prescription narcotics, such as Vicodin and OxyContin, sedatives and stimulants, says Spoonamore, a psychiatrist and addiction specialist who works primarily with young people. Teens, and those as young as 12, will look for pills in their parents' or friends' medicine cabinets and use them to get high.

"They disregard the lethal effects of these medications," she says.

At "pharm" and "bowling" parties, she says young people will pop handfuls of pill combinations, sometimes mixing them with alcohol and other drugs, such as marijuana. The interactions can lead to dangerous health problems, affecting the respiratory and cardiac systems and leading to illness and death. In some cases, withdrawal from these substances can cause dangerous medical complications as well, says Spoonamore, previously on the staff at New Canaan's Silver Hill Hospital and now with a private practice in Greenwich, Rowayton and New York City.

Those who track teen drug use say abuse of prescription drugs continues to be a major problem.

Throughout the 1990s, surveys showed steady growth in the nonmedical use of prescription drugs, according to the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research.

The federal Department of Health and Human Services' 2007 National Survey on Drug Use and Health found that in 2006 and 2007, about 5.2 million people 12 and older -- or 2.1 percent each year -- were nonmedical users of prescription pain relievers. The department also found that from 2002 to 2004, 6.7 percent of those age 12-17 misused prescription drugs.

Further, the most recent survey in the Monitoring the Future series conducted by the Michigan institute reveals that prescription drug abuse in teens is continuing at a high rate, with seven out of 10 drugs abused by high school seniors in 2007 prescribed or purchased over the counter.

The 2003 Connecticut Adult Household Survey reported that lifetime rates for nonmedical use of prescription drugs were more than those for heroin and methamphetamines.

While national statistics reveal the depth of the abuse, local statistics are hard to come by. Stephanie Paulmeno, community health planner for Greenwich, says area police departments have identified this abuse as a growing problem based on what young people are telling them. These departments, along with community health officials, are working to raise awareness among parents and medical professionals.

And in what may be an indication of growing need, Silver Hill Hospital, which serves people with psychiatric illnesses and substance abuse disorders, recently launched a new residential program to serve teens.

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Paulmeno is working to survey Greenwich teens about their drug and alcohol use and other risky behaviors in the hope that the town can get a more accurate sense of the problem. In addition to taking pills -- often that are expired -- from home medicine cabinets, young people also are finding ways to procure the pills online, she says.

Ingrid Gillespie, director of the Lower Fairfield County Regional Action Council, says this kind of access has spurred area and state officials, as well as family physicians and pediatricians, to work toward greater awareness and better prevention. For instance, in October, a national "Lock Your Meds," day encouraged parents to safeguard their prescriptions and talk about the issue with their children.

"Sometimes intervention is as easy as a conversation," Gillespie says.

Experts say the problem is compounded because psychotherapeutic drugs, when taken under the care of a physician, can be an integral part of treatment for psychiatric disorders and chronic pain.

And, since children are aware that they can improve health in some situations, they believe it is a safe way to get high.

Marc Brodsky, medical director at the Center for Integrative Medicine and Wellness at Stamford Hospital, notes that opioids, or prescription painkillers, can be helpful in conditions that include cancer and acute pain, as well as pain associated with surgery.

In chronic conditions, however, the side effects can become harmful. These include decreased alertness, nausea, constipation and, in some cases, hyperalgesia, or a heightened sensitivity to pain. Patients also can become addicted if not monitored,

leading to uses that are not intended, and at doses that were not initially prescribed.

Just as attention is being given to stopping the misuse of prescription drugs among teens, he says it also brings a focus on how adults might seek alternatives to managing pain. For instance, he says the center works with patients to see whether treatments such as pressure-point therapy and acupuncture, or changes in diet, sleep, social support, exercise and diet could alleviate the suffering.

As a society, Spoonamore says the use of prescription drugs has increased, and savvy young adults see them as something adults consider a fix to physical and mental health problems.

Such an assumption likely goes into the belief among teens that there is less shame associated with using pain pills than illicit street drugs, she says.

But the picture is not all doom and gloom, she says. Young people who become addicted can become healthy again, but they need to get into treatment as soon as possible.

She says the work then can begin on getting to the underlying problems, such as anxiety, that may have led to the drugs' use in the first place. She says she has seen such turnarounds.

"They are happier and they have such a better quality of life," she says.

"It really is transforming. It is a wonderful thing to see."

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Prescribing protections Parents and caregivers can

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help to reduced the risk of prescription drug abuse among teens, according to specialists who work with young people. Liberation Programs, with offices in Stamford and Bridgeport, is a nonprofit substance abuse and treatment organization that provides multiple programs and services, such as Family and Youth Options that works to keep children from using dangerous substances or engaging in other high-risk behaviors. Parents can help in its mission by better safeguarding prescription drugs found in the home. The organization suggests that parents and caregivers: Properly dispose of any unused prescription drugs. Keep all prescription orders and drugs in a secure location. Arrange with school nurses to dispense your child's medications. Do not send children to school with medicines and prescriptions. Know the medicines your children are taking, as well as the side effects and interactions with other products they are taking. For more tips and suggestions, visit Liberation Programs at www.liberationprograms.org/yo.htm and the Lower Fairfield County Regional Action Council at www.lfcrac.org. Click on the link under Prescription Drug Alert to download a flyer created by the Connecticut Prescription Drug Abuse Task Force. Signs of danger The Partnership for a Drug-Free America has worked to bring increased attention to the dangers of the abuse of prescription drugs. It provides parents with tips to keep their children safe, such as urging parents to keep track of refills and to make sure teens are properly using prescription drugs, by monitoring the dosages and refills. It also alerts parents to signs of abuse. Here are some tips: Look for nausea and vomiting and constricted pupils when it comes to pain reliever abuse. The misuse of prescription drugs also can lead to life-threatening respiratory problems. In stimulant abuse, young people can experience chest pain with heart palpitations and their skin can become flushed. They also may exhibit anxiety and delusions. Teens who misuse depressants also face potentially life-threatening respiratory reactions, and can exhibit

dizziness and slurred speech. For more information, visit www.drugfree.org. -- Christina Hennessy

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