

It is imperative to have conversations with children about drug use and abuse early and often. The Candor Health Education *Science Behind Drugs* programs teach our youngest students about proper use of medications and then layer on more opioid specific information by the end of middle school. The most recent data from the CDC tells us that this education is more important than ever. With overdose deaths on the rise in 2020 (over 90,000) and nearly 70,000 of the deaths due to opioids, the time for conversation is now. This newsletter will explore some of the drug trends that are driving these frightening statistics, provide background information on opioids and offer age-appropriate conversation suggestions to help you talk to your child about prescription medication and opioids.

What is an Opioid? How do they work?

Opioids drugs can be derived from the opium poppy plant or made synthetically in lab. Some opioids are illegal (i.e., heroin), but many are legal and include a variety of pain medications that are commonly prescribed by doctors (i.e., oxycodone, codeine, and fentanyl).

Opioids are powerful drugs that impact the way the body and brain communicate. While the pain a person feels is not removed, the pain messages are blocked from the body to the brain. At the same time, opioids produce a powerful release of endorphins or feel-good chemicals. As opioid use continues, a person often has to use more of the drug to feel the same level of euphoria. When this happens it is a sign that changes to the chemical balance in the brain has occurred.



Opioids and the Developing Brain

It is important to remember that a young person's brain is changing rapidly during adolescence. During this time, the connections between neurons that are frequently used are strengthening and those that are unused are trimmed away. The chemical changes to the brain that are caused by drugs, can interfere with this important process and can increase the likelihood of developing an addiction. Research shows that individuals who are prescribed opioids prior to high school graduation are 33% more likely to misuse prescription opioids after graduating (SAMHSA).

It is also important to recognize some other facts about the adolescent brain, which can influence decision-making and desire to engage in risk-taking behaviors. First, the pre-frontal cortex or decision-making area of the brain is still being developed and continues to develop into the mid-twenties. Next, the limbic system or the area of the brain that oversees emotions and memories is fully developed by around age 15. This combination leaves young people more prone to impulsive behavior.

Opioids are depressants, which slow down the brain stem. When taken with alcohol, which is also a depressant, the risks can be especially dangerous. This combination can slow down the heart rate and breathing, even to the point where it is fatal. Speaking to young people about the dangers of taking opioids with other substances is critical.

Additional Online Resources:

<https://candorhealthed.org/parent-information/family-resources/resources-drug-education/opioid-information/>
<https://candorhealthed.org/drug-education-portal/>
<https://teens.drugabuse.gov/>
<https://drugfree.org/>

DEA Public Safety Alert – September 2021

The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) issued an alert at the end of September “on the sharp increase in fake prescription pills containing fentanyl.” This is the first alert that the agency has issued in the last six years. They are warning of the “alarming increase in the lethality and availability” of counterfeit pills. Increasingly, young people are purchasing pills, often on-line, what they believe to be Xanax or Percocet or OxyContin, only to find the pills are laced with fentanyl – a synthetic opioid that is 100x stronger than morphine. According to DEA statistics, 2 in every 5 pills seized contain a lethal dose of fentanyl. With the release of this alert, the DEA has launched a “One Pill Can Kill” awareness campaign to help get the word out.

Watch the below video "On-line Access to Fentanyl-laced Drugs"

Let your
teen know
that “one
pill can kill.”



Age- Appropriate Conversations to Have with Your Child on Opioids and Prescription Drugs

Prescription drugs are among the most commonly misused substances among young people age 14 and older. In 2018, more than 695,000 youths ages 12-17 and 1.9 million young adults ages 18-25 reported misusing prescription pain medication in the past year (SAMHSA). Here are some of the topics you can cover with your children depending upon their age.

Conversations in the Elementary Years:

- What is a Drug?
- How do Drugs Impact the Brain and Body? (slow down, speed up or confuse the nervous system)
- Over-the-Counter vs. Prescription Medication
- Always Taken with Adult Supervision
- Why and How to Read the Labels on Medication
- Only Taking Medication that is Prescribed to You

Conversations in the Middle School Years:

- Brain Development – Dramatic Changes During Adolescence
- What is Addiction? What is Withdrawal?
- What is an Opioid? Why Would People Use Opioids?

Additional Online Resources:

<https://candorhealthed.org/parent-information/family-resources/resources-drug-education/opioid-information/>
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What are some tips for talking to your child about opioids?

- ➔ **Give them the facts and start early** - Answer their questions honestly as they arise. Let them know the impacts on their developing brain, and the risks associated with early use.
- ➔ **Be approachable and initiate conversations on topic** - Teens often become defensive when they think a lecture is coming. Talking while in the car can be a more comfortable place to talk. Talking about it once is not enough.
- ➔ **Use news or stories as a way to start conversations** - When something related to prescription pain medication is in the news use it as a way to start the conversation. Perhaps share a story about something that has happened to you or a friend or neighbor.
- ➔ **Share your values** - The number one reason kids say that they do not use alcohol and other drugs is because their parents will be disappointed. Communicate your expectations regarding opioids and other drugs.
- ➔ **Ask them what they know** - With social media and the Internet at their fingertips, chances are they may be seeing the “advertisements” for prescription medications from drug dealers on-line. What have they seen or heard from classmates or friends?

Tips for Prevention:

Establish Clear Rules

Setting clear, specific rules is the foundation for the parental effort in prevention. Create the rules with your child and enforce them consistently.

Keep Track of Medications

Young people frequently gain access to prescription medications at home. It is important to properly dispose of medications in a timely manner.

Build the Parent/Child Relationship

Eat meals together when you can. Remove electronics from meals, bedrooms, and family activities. Take an interest in your child's interests.

Promote Healthy Activities

Fight off the dreaded “I'm bored.” Help your child get involved in physical activities, community activities, arts or a part-time job.

Know Their Friends

Pay attention to who your child is hanging out with and take the opportunity to introduce yourself to their parents.

Be their way out

Let your child know that they can call you anytime to come get them or when in a peer pressure situation. They can use you as an excuse.

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Chicago High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas