

Myth 8: “The non-medical use of prescription drugs is safe and legal”



Did you know that prescription drugs are the most commonly misused substance by teens after marijuana and alcohol? You might think it is safe to take prescription drugs whenever you feel like it, if it was your doctor, a friend or family member who gave them to you and that the substance is controlled anyways. However, we want to draw your attention to the fact that the non-medical use of prescription drugs can just be as dangerous as the use of other substances. The non-medical use of prescription drugs ranges from taking someone else’s prescription in order to relax or sooth pain, taking a medication to “get high”, to obtaining medicine under false pretence or illegally from the street or the Internet. In short, every form of taking prescription drugs in a manner not intended by the prescriber. In many parts of the world young people are the group most affected, especially those in high school and college. Furthermore, in many places, such as the United States, the non-medical use of prescription drugs is higher among women than men.¹²³

It is crucial to know how powerful these drugs are, and to follow your doctor’s guidance when using them. This fact sheet will help you understand what kind of myths there are regarding this important topic and how you can make better informed decisions, and know how drug use can impact your health and safety, mind and body. It is important to know that feeling stressed, under pressure and sometimes under the weather is part of life and that everyone is going through daily ups and downs.

❖ **My doctor prescribed me these drugs. Is it, therefore, safer to use than other illicit substances?**

It is no safer option to use prescription drugs inappropriately than other illicit substances, simply because they were prescribed by a doctor or other health professional and the substance itself is controlled. In reality, using these drugs can be just as harmful as illicit street drugs, such as heroin or cocaine. It is no safer alternative! Especially when taken along with other drugs or alcohol, the use of these substances can have unexpected and serious consequences, and has in some cases even led to death. Studies have shown that the number of deaths attributed to an overdose caused by the non-medical use of prescription drugs is on a stark rise worldwide.⁴ When taken according to the prescription, they safely treat the medical problem. However, when used excessively or inappropriately, unexpected effects can occur, including a change in brain activity and

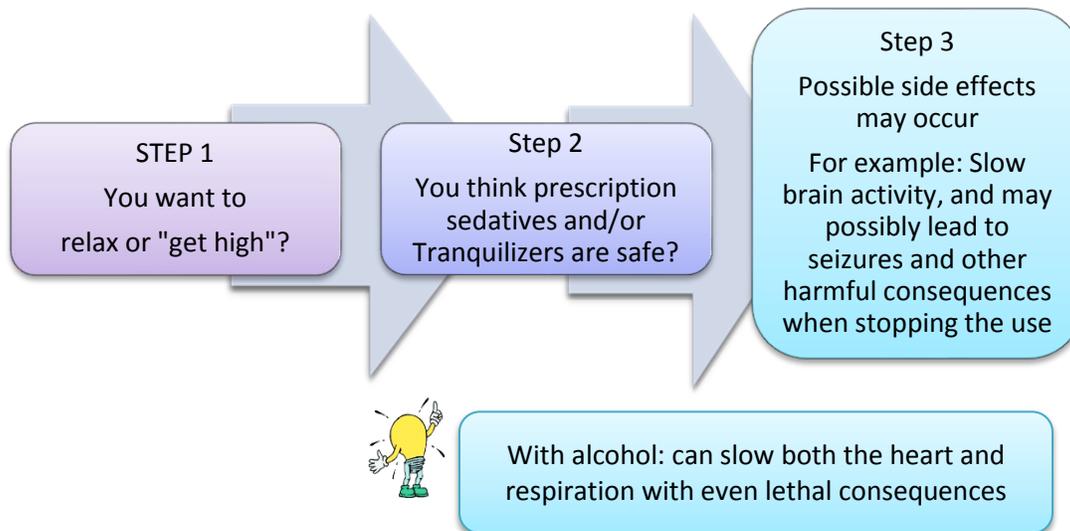
¹ http://www.unodc.org/doc/wdr2016/WORLD_DRUG_REPORT_2016_web.pdf

² <https://bmcp psychiatry.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12888-016-0909-3>

³ ESPAD 2015 <http://www.espad.org/report/situation/pharmaceutical-use>

⁴ <https://www.unodc.org/documents/drug-prevention-and-treatment/nonmedical-use-prescription-drugs.pdf>

addiction. Despite the fact that these substances are controlled, it is crucial to take them according to your doctor's guidance. The substance will only work safely, if used in a manner corresponding to the purpose the drug was produced for combined with the right medical supervision.



❖ **As I, or my family or friends, got the drugs from doctor, is it legal for me to use?**

It is mistakenly thought that taking prescription drugs without a prescription or in a way other than prescribed is legal. Using these drugs is commonly compared to underage drinking or illicit street drugs, which make prescription drugs seem “more legal”. However, using medication other than prescribed or with someone else’s prescription is illegal, as these are controlled substances and are only allowed to be sold and later used with a prescription, or for research purposes. Their use has been regulated by the three international drug treaties - for further information go to:

- <https://www.unodc.org/documents/drug-prevention-and-treatment/nonmedical-use-prescription-drugs.pdf>
- <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/commissions/CND/conventions.html>

❖ **Everyone is doing it?**

Frequently, students overestimate their friends’ non-medical use of prescription drugs, which leads to the misconception that “everyone is doing it” and that it is, therefore, normal, safe and acceptable. It is crucial to know that it is not. Inform yourself about the prevalence in your country or region, if available, from the resources below! For example, in Europe an average of 4% of students (15-16 year olds) reported using painkillers ‘to get high’, and in the US 6% of the same aged students reported using tranquilisers without prescription⁵.

- <http://www.espad.org/report/situation/pharmaceutical-use>
- <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/statistics/drug-use.html>

⁵ <http://www.espad.org/report/home>