

Cough Medicine and Prescription Drug Abuse

OVERVIEW

You already know about the dangers of illegal street drugs like marijuana, cocaine, and methamphetamine. But did you know that some teens are abusing legal products, like cough medicine, to get high? This page will provide the answers to many questions about cough medicine abuse, give helpful tips for preventing this and other types of drug abuse, and offer other resources for more information.

WHAT IS COUGH MEDICINE ABUSE?

Cough medicine abuse is taking extremely large doses of cough medicine to get high. The “high” is caused by taking a large amount of dextromethorphan, which is often abbreviated DXM, a common active ingredient found in many cough medications. This sort of abuse, whether it’s called cough medicine abuse, or dextromethorphan or DXM abuse, can be dangerous.

WHAT IS DEXTROMETHORPHAN?

Dextromethorphan is a safe and effective active ingredient found in many nonprescription, over the counter (OTC) cough medicines, including syrups, tablets, and gel caps. When used according to medicine label directions, the ingredient dextromethorphan produces few side effects and has a long history of safety. When abused in large amounts, it can produce a “high” feeling as well as several dangerous side effects.

WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF COUGH MEDICINE ABUSE?

The effects of abusing cough medicines containing dextromethorphan vary with the amount taken. Common effects when taken in large amounts include confusion, dizziness, double or blurred vision, slurred speech, loss of physical coordination, abdominal pain, nausea and vomiting, rapid heartbeat, drowsiness, numbness of fingers and toes, and disorientation.

DXM abusers describe different “plateaus” ranging from mild distortions of color and sound to visual hallucinations, “out-of-body” dissociative sensations, and loss of motor control. Side effects can be worsened if the dextromethorphan-containing cough medicine being abused also contains other ingredients to treat more than just coughs. Cough medicine also is sometimes abused in combination with other medications, alcohol, and illegal drugs, which can increase the dangerous side effects.

WHAT COUGH MEDICINES CONTAIN DEXTROMETHORPHAN, OR DXM?

There are over 100 OTC medicines that contain DXM, either as the only active ingredient or in combination with other active ingredients. Examples include Alka-Seltzer Plus Cold & Cough Formula, Coricidin HBP Cough and Cold, Dimetapp® DM, Mucinex® DM tablets, PediaCare cough medicines, certain Robitussin® cough products, Sudafed cough products, TheraFlu Cough products, Triaminic cough products, Tylenol Cough and Tylenol Cold products, Vicks 44 Cough Relief products, and certain Vicks DayQuil and NyQuil LiquiCaps. Several store brands contain dextromethorphan, as well.

To know if a product contains DXM, look for “dextromethorphan” in the *active ingredient* section of the OTC Drug Facts label. You also may look for an educational icon on the packaging of most OTC cough medicines containing dextromethorphan.

WHAT ARE SLANG TERMS FOR DEXTROMETHORPHAN?

The most common terms include Dex, DXM, Robo, Skittles, Syrup, Triple-C, and Tussin. Terms for using dextromethorphan include: Robo-ing, Robo-tripping, and Skittling, among others. Slang terms for dextromethorphan vary by product and region. Adults should be familiar with all of them.

HOW COMMON IS COUGH MEDICINE ABUSE?

Research shows that one out of 10 teens, or over two million teens, from across the country and of all backgrounds, has abused cough medicine to get high.

WHERE ARE TEENS FINDING INFORMATION ABOUT COUGH MEDICINE ABUSE?

Often, these teens find information about how to abuse cough medicine on the Internet. Several web sites promote the abuse of cough medicines containing DXM. Some of these sites even recommend how much to take; suggest other drugs to combine with DXM; instruct how to extract DXM from cough medicines; promote drug abuse in general; or even sell a raw, unfinished form of DXM for snorting. Be aware of what your teen does on the Internet, the web sites he or she visits, and the amount of time he or she is logged on.

The abuse of cough medicine also now can be seen in some current music, movies, and fashion.

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO TO PREVENT COUGH MEDICINE ABUSE

Parents can make a positive difference in their teens' lives, and research shows that parents do influence their teens' decisions about whether to take drugs or not. To prevent DXM abuse specifically, the best advice is to educate yourself, communicate with your teens, and safeguard your medications.

EDUCATE YOURSELF

- Educate yourself about cough medicine abuse and share this information with others who are in contact with your teen, such as school administrators, coaches, and counselors.
- Know the signs of cough medicine abuse and what to watch out for.

COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR TEENS

- Be clear that you do not want your teen taking medicine without your knowledge.
- Teach your teens and younger children to respect medicines. Medicines are important tools in healthcare, but they must be used according to directions.
- Make sure your teen understands that abusing cough medicine, just as using illegal drugs, can be very dangerous.

SAFEGUARD MEDICATIONS

- Know what medicines are in your home and pay attention to quantities.
- Keep all medications out of reach and out of easily accessible places like medicine cabinets.
- If your child needs medications during school hours, speak with school officials about medicine policies in the school.