

“Pharm-Raised” Teens
Oxycontin Abuse Prevalent Among Adolescents

By Deborah Alexander, Attorney at Law

There is an alarming trend in the teen population of the abusive use of the prescription drug, Oxycontin. Kids are getting these drugs from their parents' medicine cabinets and from their doctors' offices. And it is not just the “burnouts” or “druggies” who are illegally using Oxycontin, but student athletes, academics, and the kid down the street as well. Illegally obtained prescription drugs are the second-most used drugs among teens, behind marijuana, but the awareness of this problem by parents and others in our communities needs to be heightened.¹ Severe legal consequences -- including time in juvenile detention or jail and the possibility of not being admitted into a college -- are the risks at stake for teens who abuse Oxycontin and other prescription drugs.

The prescription drug, Oxycontin, is a central nervous system depressant. The drug is often prescribed by doctors for moderate to high pain relief associated with injuries, arthritis, lower back and cancer pain.² It is a “Schedule II Controlled Substance” with an abuse liability similar to morphine.³ Other Schedule II drugs that have a high potential for abuse are cocaine and methamphetamine.⁴ Oxycontin pills/tablets contain a time release formula and are intended to be swallowed whole. Abusers of the drug crush the pills using the time-release purpose of rapid release and absorption of Oxycontin to get an enhanced high. They either snort the powder, ingest it orally, or insert it rectally or by injection. Oxycontin is available in a variety of strengths: 10 mg, 15mg, 20 mg, 40mg, and 80mg. It is commonly referred to on the streets as OC, OX, Oxy, Oxycotton, Hillbilly Heroin, and/or Kicker, and its street value goes for approximately one dollar per milligram. The profit margin from selling Oxycontin on the streets is enormous since it can be purchased through pharmacists at a co-pay reduced rate or stolen from family and friends for free.

¹Arnold, Chris. “Teen Abuse of Painkiller Oxycontin On The Rise.” NPR. 5 February 2009.
<<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5061674>>.

²Homepage. Publishers Group, LLC 2008.
<<http://www.streetdrugs.org/oxycodone.htm>>.

³Homepage. RxList Inc., 2009.
<<http://www.rxlist.com/oxycontin-drug.htm>>

⁴National Drug Intelligence Center. Homepage. January 1, 2006.
<<http://www.usdoj.gov/ndic/pubs6/6025/index.htm>>

One reason why prescription drugs such as Oxycontin have become increasingly popular amongst teens is that they are arguably a more socially acceptable way of getting high than taking substances such as marijuana or cocaine which are illegal under all circumstances except perhaps medical marijuana. In our current culture, there is less of a negative connotation to being on prescription medication to control moods, depression and anxiety than may have been the case in prior generations. It is also no longer a foreign concept in this generation to treat our children's behavioral disorders with prescribed medicine. To this end, pediatric prescriptions for the drug, Ritalin, have skyrocketed to treat Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). In fact, five million kids take prescription drugs every day for behavioral disorders.⁵ While these prescription drugs are generally often safe if taken by the intended patient for a specified diagnosis, prescription drugs can be extremely dangerous if taken by others for a different purpose. Nevertheless, some teen and adult abusers labor under the potentially dangerous misperception that prescription drugs are a safe way of getting high because they are prescribed by doctors.

The reality is that Oxycontin is highly addictive and teens are more likely than adults to become physically and psychologically dependant on the drug.⁶ In a recent study published September 10, 2008 in *Neuropsychopharmacology*, it was determined that adolescents have a heightened sensitivity to highs brought on by Oxyconton.⁷ "The bodies of those young, healthy people who just start taking Oxycodone for fun respond differently than the body of those in pain."⁸ Therefore, it is believed that adolescents are more likely than adults to become addicted to Oxycontin.⁹

In a 2005 survey by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America, 19% of U.S. teenagers reported having taken prescription painkillers including Oxycontin and Ritalin to get high.¹⁰ The National Institute on Drug Abuse reports that Oxycontin use by 12th graders is up 40 percent nationwide in just

⁵ Leinwand, Donna. "Prescription Drugs Find Place In Teen Culture." USA Today 13 June 2006. http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2006-06-12-teens-pharm-drugs_x.htm

⁶ Gardner, Amanda. "Teen Brain Might Get Hooked Easier On Oxycontin." Healthday 10 September 2008. <<http://Health.usnews.com/articles/health/healthday/2008/09/10/teen-brain-might-get-hooked-...>>

⁷ Id.

⁸ Id.

⁹ Id.

¹⁰ Leinwand, Donna. "Prescription Drugs Find Place In Teen Culture." USA Today 13 June 2006. <http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2006-06-12-teens-pharm-drugs_x.htm>

three years. Five times as many twelfth graders report using Oxycontin than report using methamphetamine.¹¹ Additionally, the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research conducts an annual national survey on adolescent drug use. The survey is comprised of 50,000 8th, 10th, and 12th graders in more than 400 public and private schools nationwide. The results of the survey showed that past-year use of Oxycontin has almost doubled among 8th graders since 2002.¹² Oxycontin and Vicodin use was prevalent among teen drug abusers.¹³ Indeed, Vicodin and Oxycontin are more popular among high school seniors than Ecstasy and cocaine.¹⁴

Kevin Cole, a drug and alcohol counselor and executive director of Cole's counseling Center in Edmonds, Washington, stated, "In 25 years of being a drug and alcohol counselor, I have never seen a drug take off as quickly in the teen population as Oxycontin." Most of Cole's adolescent clients come from wealthy families. These kids attend both public and private schools. All it takes is a onetime experimentation or use of Oxycontin and a teen can get hooked on the drug. The initial high feels so good and the kid continues to use in order to reach that initial high, but they never do. "Life for these youths gets worse and they want the original highest feeling back. Eventually, it rapidly gets to the point where the teen is just taking Oxycontin to feel normal, not high," stated Cole.

The psychological and physical dependence on Oxycontin causes addicts to lie and steal to obtain the drugs or money to purchase the drugs on the street. Mom and dad are the first to get stolen from according to Cole. Cole also commented that, "Kids will steal these medications from their parents' medicine cabinets or will steal a check from the middle of the parent's checkbook to fund their habit. The addict will justify their actions by rationalizing they will pay their loved ones back and then they will forget about it." Not only are teens raiding medicine cabinets but they are also robbing pharmacies to the point where signs are being posted in the pharmacy windows stating, "Oxycontin by Special Order Only." Additionally, some addicts obtain their Oxycontin by "doctor shopping" and fabricating ailments whereby these individuals, who may or may not have a legitimate medical issues, visit many doctors to acquire the Oxycontin.¹⁵

¹¹ Arnold, Chris. "Teen Abuse of Painkiller Oxycontin On The Rise." NPR. 5 February 2009. <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5061674>>.

¹² Nih Record Homepage. 9 February 2007. <http://Nihrecord.od.nih.gov/newsletters/2007/02_09_2007/story4.htm>.

¹³ U.S. Food and Drug Administration. 18 July 2007. <<http://www.fda.gov/consumer/updates/antidrug071807.html>>.

¹⁴ Id.

¹⁵ U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. Homepage.

The legal consequences for a teen who is caught possessing or selling Oxycontin or an illegally obtained prescription drug could be quite severe and expensive. If your teen is caught using or selling a controlled substance and is arrested, your teen will need a lawyer. The adolescent abuser may face up to months in juvenile detention or jail if they are over 18 years old, suspension or revocation of a driver's license, and may be jeopardizing his or her admission into a college. Many Colleges and University applications for admission inquire as to whether the student has ever been arrested or convicted of a crime. The juvenile criminal defense attorney would likely order a drug and alcohol evaluation along with psychological testing and get the juvenile into treatment. If your teen is over eighteen years old, he/she will likely face adult criminal charges and a conviction could be permanent on their criminal record.

The warning signs for parents to look out for to determine if their teen is abusing Oxycontin are:

- A significant dramatic change in your teen's behavior.
- Decline in grades.
- Long periods of kids being alone in their bedrooms.
- A sense of secrecy that is going on.
- Personality changes.
- Violent behavior.

There are many effective steps that parents can take to stop the teen abuse of Oxycontin, these are:

- Educate yourself and your teen about the risks.
- Keep track of quantities of prescription drugs in the house.
- Talk to your friends, the school, and community about the risks and have them monitor their own medicine cabinets.
- Follow directions carefully on all prescription drugs.

<<http://www.usdoj.gov/dea/concern/oxycontin.html>>

- Discard old or unused medications in the trash. Do not flush medications down the drain or toilets because the chemicals can taint the water supply. Also, remove any personal identifiable information on prescription bottles before you throw them away.
- Monitor your teen's time on-line and check browser history.
- Be observant.
- Help your teen find other ways to reduce stress.
- Be aware of the peers your teen hangs out with and encourage positive friendships and activities. Listen and offer guidance to your teen.

There are also precautions that doctors can take to lessen the potential for abuse of Oxycontin:

- Some patients who take potentially addictive medication may require periodic urine drug screening.
- Switch patients to non-drug treatments such as physical therapy and relaxation techniques.
- Talk about substance abuse and the potential for abuse with patients.
- Recognize signs of substance abuse.
- Inquire about patients past history of substance abuse.¹⁶

In conclusion, the abuse of prescription medicine can be as harmful to a teen as using illicit drugs. The legal, physical and psychological consequences can be just as severe. If your adolescent has been arrested for possessing or selling Oxycontin or other drugs you should contact an attorney immediately to get your child into treatment and provide him or her with the appropriate representation to resolve these issues and get him/her back on the right track to a promising future.

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¹⁶Meadows, Michelle. "Prescription Drug Use and Abuse." US Food and Drug Administration Septmeber-October 2001.
<http://www.fda.gov/fdac/features/2001/501_drug.html>.