

Youth Opioid Survey: Attitudes and Usage

Executive Summary

An enormous amount of research has confirmed that prescription pain medications and heroin (known collectively as opioids) pose real and serious problems affecting all sectors of American society. **This survey highlights attitudes and prevalence among young adults, ages 18-24, and provides fresh insights on the problems faced on and off our college campuses**, supporting the wider research base established in studies like the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, Monitoring the Future and the College Life Study, and providing further evidence that comprehensive solutions are needed.

Key findings include:

ACCESS

Young adults say opioids are easy to get and share

A third of total respondents (32.7 percent) said prescription pain pills are “easy” to acquire, with half (49.5 percent) saying they could get them within 24 hours. The easiest source: parent’s or friend’s medicine cabinets. And, although 84.9 percent said they know it is illegal to share prescription opioids, 23.6 percent said this knowledge wouldn’t stop them from sharing.

PERCEPTION OF RISK

Despite knowledge of danger around prescription pain medication, many young people are opioid risk takers and do not realize how similar such medications are to heroin

While the vast majority (86.6 percent) know that certain pain medications are addictive, nearly one in six (15.5 percent) respondents would consider trying a pain pill not prescribed to them and one in 10 (11 percent) said they have taken a pill without knowing what it was.

At the same time, only one in 20 (4.9 percent) would take a pill if it were known as a “heroin pill.” Fifty-five percent said they did not know opioid pain medications are similar to heroin in terms of their impact on the mind and body, and, despite the chemical similarities, *almost 60 percent said they thought prescription pain medicine was less risky than heroin*. In fact, respondents collectively rated heroin as 31 percent more risky than prescription pain medication (4.44 on a riskiness scale of 1-5 versus 3.39 for pain medications).

Youth and young adults categorize drugs into two classes of danger

Heroin, meth, cocaine and ecstasy (molly) were rated consistently higher in perceived danger than prescription pain medication, attention deficit disorder medication, alcohol or marijuana.

KNOWLEDGE OF AVAILABLE HELP

Too many don't know where to turn for help for themselves or a friend

Even though almost one-third (30.8 percent) of respondents say they know of someone who has overdosed on prescribed pain medication or heroin, 37.2 percent said they would have no idea of where to go for help if they, or someone they know, experienced an overdose.

PREVALANCE & USE

One in 10 respondents was currently taking a pain medication prescribed to them

Of those, 29 percent said they had experienced problems as a result of their use and about one-fifth (20.2 percent) reported using the pills in excess of the dose prescribed.

One in six have used prescription pain pills not prescribed to them

Almost 16 percent of respondents said they have used pain pills NOT prescribed to them at some point in their life. This number is higher – 22.5 percent – among those who are or were in intercollegiate sports.

College-age youth are prescribed a wide variety of pain medications, with Vicodin and morphine most commonly prescribed and used in the past month, and many report getting prescriptions they never used

The top five most common pain medications prescribed and the percent of respondents who received the prescription and used it in the past 30 days: Vicodin (6.8 percent); morphine (6.5 percent); codeine (5.9 percent); OxyContin (5.2 percent); and Demerol (4.4 percent). Interestingly, 14 percent of respondents on average, depending on the substance prescribed, said they have been prescribed pain medications they did not use at all, possibly contributing to the excess supply in medicine cabinets.

Greatest reasons for obtaining the prescription are for surgeries or pain

The top reasons young adults receive pain medication prescriptions are for surgeries, including dental surgeries (55.8 percent). Notably, 17.9 percent report obtaining opioid prescriptions for chronic or long-term pain, for which there's limited evidence to support its effectiveness.

College versus Non-college

Survey responses were gathered from an approximately equal number of people who attend or have attended college and those who have not. The response variance was consistently negligible.

Survey Conducted By

Q Market Research of Eagan, Minn.
(www.qmarketresearch.com)

Survey Commissioned By

Hazelden Betty Ford Institute for Recovery Advocacy
(www.HBFInstitute.org)
The Christie Foundation

Survey Methodology

Data was collected using an email survey from respondents ages 18 to 24, who live in the United States. Responses were gathered from an approximately equal number of males and females as well as those who attend/have attended college and those who have not.

Data Collection

The survey was conducted from March 30 to April 17, 2015, with 1,151 responses gathered that met the requirements outlined in the Survey Methodology section. Overall results obtained from the survey are statistically valid (at a 95 percent confidence level) to within +/- 2.8 percent.

Press release and full survey results available at www.hazelden.org/web/public/youth-opioid-survey.page