



PREVENTING TEEN OVER-THE-COUNTER COUGH MEDICINE (DXM) ABUSE: A Parent's Guide



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You may already know about the dangers of street drugs like marijuana, cocaine and methamphetamine. But did you know that some teens are abusing legal, over-the-counter (OTC) cough medicine, to get high? In fact, **1 in 8 teens has reported getting high on over-the-counter cough medicine.** This guide will offer answers to many questions about cough medicine abuse, give helpful tips for preventing this and other types of drug abuse and provide resources for more information.

Q: What is cough medicine abuse?

Cough medicine abuse is taking extremely large doses of over-the-counter 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 OTC cough medicines. This sort of abuse — whether it’s called cough medicine or dextromethorphan or DXM abuse — can be dangerous.

Q: What is dextromethorphan?

Dextromethorphan is a safe and effective active ingredient found in many nonprescription 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 a number of dangerous side effects.

Q: What are the effects of over-the-counter cough medicine abuse?

The effects of abuse of OTC cough medicine containing dextromethorphan vary with the amount taken. Common effects 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 sensation 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.

OTC cough medicine is also sometimes abused in combination with other medicine, alcohol and street drugs, which can increase the dangerous side effects.

Q: What over-the-counter cough medicines contain dextromethorphan (DXM)?

There are well 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 Medicine, 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. There also are a number of store brands that 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.

Q: What are slang terms for dextromethorphan?

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



Q: How common is cough medicine abuse?

Recent research indicates that the abuse of OTC cough medicine is a greater problem than previously thought. The research shows that 1 out of 8 teens, or about 2.5 million teens, from across the country and of all backgrounds, has abused OTC cough medicine to get high.

Q: Where are teens finding information about cough medicine abuse?

There are references to OTC cough medicine abuse in teen culture. Some mainstream music mentions cough medicine as a way to get high. Another source? The Internet.

A number of disreputable websites promote the abuse of OTC cough medicines containing DXM. The information on these sites includes recommending how much to take, suggesting other drugs to combine with OTC cough medicine, instructing how to extract DXM from cough medicines, promoting drug abuse in general and even selling a raw, unfinished form of DXM for snorting. You should be aware of what your teen is doing on the Internet, the websites he or she visits, and the amount of time he or she is logged on.

Q: What Parents Can Do to Prevent Over-The-Counter 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 medicine.

What You Can Do

EDUCATE YOURSELF

- Educate yourself about over-the-counter cough medicine abuse and share this information with others who are in contact with your teen, such as school administrators, coaches and counselors.

- Make sure you're aware of the signs of cough medicine abuse and what to watch out for. Common effects 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.

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 medicine. Medicine is an important tool in healthcare, but it must be used according to directions.

- Make sure your teen understands that abusing OTC cough medicine — just as abusing street drugs — can be very dangerous.

SAFEGUARD MEDICINE AT HOME AND OTHER PLACES

- Know what medicine is in your home and pay attention to quantities across time.

- Keep all medicine out of easily accessible places (like medicine cabinets) and locked up.

- If your child needs medicine during school hours, speak with school officials about medicine policies in the school.

MORE TIPS FOR RAISING DRUG-FREE TEENS

Monitoring is an effective way you can help your teen stay drug-free, and an important thing to do even if you don't suspect your teen is using drugs. Monitoring means asking young people questions about where they're going, what they're doing and with whom they're spending time, as well as keeping tabs on their Internet use by using web browser tools and software designed to block certain sites. Put some of these tips to use and your kids will benefit.

TALK WITH YOUR TEEN

Kids who say they learn a lot about the risks of drugs at home are at least 20 percent less likely to try drugs than those who do not get that critical message at home. [Parents should talk often](#), listen regularly and communicate clearly that they do not want their kids using drugs. To talk credibly and... effectively about the dangers of drugs, parents need to know what those dangers are. Your teen can probably tell if you haven't done your research, so know the facts. Learn about the [prescription drugs and over-the-counter medicines some teens abuse](#) — including over-the-counter cough medicine — and their risks. And [find out about other drugs teens abuse](#) at drugfree.org.

KNOW WHERE YOUR TEEN IS

It's important to know where your teen is and what he or she is doing. Research has shown that children without adult supervision are at significantly greater risk of truancy from school, stress, receiving poor grades, risk-taking behavior and substance abuse.

KNOW YOUR TEEN'S FRIENDS

Research from the Partnership for Drug-Free Kids reports that 74% of kids say they have at least a few friends who usually get high at parties; more than two-thirds of teens say they have close friends who get high regularly. Parents need to know if these are the close friends with whom their teens are spending time. Talk to your teen about their friend's attitudes about prescription drugs and over-the-counter cough medicine, and what medicine their friends have been prescribed. Teens who have smoked marijuana in the past year are much more likely to use other substances, including over-the-counter cough medicine.

INTRODUCE YOUR TEEN TO ADULT ROLE MODELS

Find out what adult-supervised activities — like clubs or after-school sports — interest your teen and help get him or her involved. Connection with other influential adults in teens' lives can also help them avoid the dangers of drugs and reinforce the benefits of healthy, drug-free living.

Recognize Signs Your Teen Is Using Drugs

Parents don't always recognize their kids might be using drugs. While it can be hard to know, there are some general warning signs you can watch for. The fact is, any teen could be using drugs, so stay alert. As a general rule, changes that are sudden or extreme may be a warning sign.



SIGNS YOUR TEEN COULD BE USING DRUGS INCLUDE:

- Change in friends
- Change in eating or sleeping patterns, or energy level
- Changes in physical appearance and hygiene
- Declining grades
- Loss of interest in hobbies or favorite activities
- Hostile and uncooperative attitude
- Unexplained disappearance of household money
- Visits to pro-drug websites
- Empty drug or medicine containers or drug paraphernalia
- Unusual chemical or medicinal smells on your child or in his or her room

Helping a Teen Who Is Using Drugs

The goal is to prevent a drug abuse problem in the first place. If you fear, however, that your teen may have a problem, sit down with your child for an open discussion about drug and alcohol use. Openly voice your suspicions but avoid direct accusations. Do not have this conversation when your teen is under the influence of alcohol or other drugs, and make sure you sound calm and rational. Ask your teen what has been going on in his or her life. Discuss ways your teen can avoid using drugs and alcohol in the future. If you need help during this conversation, ask another family member, your child's guidance counselor or a physician.



Be firm and enforce whatever discipline you've laid out in the past for breaking house rules. You should also discuss ways your teen can regain your lost trust, such as calling in, spending evenings at home and improving grades.

If your teen has been using any substances for a prolonged time, get help right away from a doctor to understand and manage the impact of withdrawal.

Resources for More Information



- If you suspect a poisoning, call your local poison control center at 1.800.222.1222.
- If you think your teen needs professional help, your doctor, hospital, or school nurse or counselor may be able to help.
- You can also call our [Parents Toll-Free Helpline](http://www.drugfree.org) at 1-855-DRUGFREE (1-855-378-4373) to speak to a parent specialist in English or Spanish.
- Visit www.drugfree.org/get-help where you'll find support from experts and other parents who have been there, answers to your most pressing questions, stories and words of hope.
- To learn more about drug prevention, visit Partnership for Drug-Free Kids at www.drugfree.org.
- Consumer Healthcare Products Association www.chap-info.org.



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