

A prescription for safety: Educating your kids, safeguarding medicine cabinet can help prevent prescription drug misuse

When your kids were young, you made sure they understood that medication was not candy – that they knew the difference between, say, an over-the-counter cold pill and a Red Hot.

Now that they are a little older, do you and they know the different affects that, for instance, Tylenol and the painkiller Vicodin have on the body? Unlike Tylenol, Vicodin produces a sense of euphoria. Some people even feel an energy boost and are tempted to take more, creating the potential for abuse.

Prescription drug abuse trends are cause for increasing concern. Oregon ranks among the top five states for non-medical use of pain relievers among 12 to 17 year olds, according to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health. A state survey found that nearly 8 percent of high school juniors in 2007 said they used prescription drugs (without a doctor's order) to get high in the past 30 days. That's more than two young people in a typical high school-size classroom, and up from about 5 percent in 2002.

Teens say prescription drugs are widely available from an array of sources, including their homes, friends and relatives, and online pharmacies. In some cases, young people perceive prescription drugs to be safer than illicit drugs, leading them to casually share these drugs with friends. One high school student, for example, took a prescription drug designed for Attention Deficit Disorder not because she had ADD but to get through final exams. She got the drug from a friend.

What you can do

Educating ourselves and our kids about the potential dangers of prescription as well as over-the-counter drugs - and safeguarding our medicine cabinet - are a big part of helping young people stay safe and healthy. The following are a handful of tips:

- Talk with your children about the inappropriate use of prescription drugs and the dangers that can result – just as you would talk with them about the harms of underage drinking and other drug use. Young people may not always admit it to their mom and dad, but as a parent you're the biggest influence in their life. The message you send about the harms of misusing prescription drugs is a powerful deterrent.
- Monitor the prescription drugs in your home – from the medicine cabinet and master bedroom to the kitchen - and keep them in a secure place. Keep track of how many pills are in a bottle or packet, and keep tabs on

refills. The practice of monitoring prescription drugs and keeping them in a secure place is equally effective when it comes to alcohol in the home.

- If you take prescription drugs such as those for pain or insomnia, the good example you set, including following a doctor's instructions and dosage recommendations, is invaluable when it comes to helping children stay safe. Explain to your child why you take prescription medication, that you are careful about it, that pills should not be shared and that it's important to have a doctor's approval to take them. Also discuss the importance of not mixing medications without a doctor or other medical provider's OK.
- Information about prescription drugs can be easily found online, and the Internet is rife with sites that sell prescription drugs without a prescription. Monitor your child's online activities and together establish rules about things such as how much time they can spend and what they can do online. Post the rules on or near the computer. Put your family's computer in the kitchen or other well-trafficked area. And be up front about the fact that you monitor their online activities just as you do their other activities.
- Advertisements for prescription drugs are all around us. Talk with your children about these ads and help them think critically about the messages they see and hear.
- Throw unneeded and expired medications in the garbage, and take care to conceal them first. Be sure to remove personal information from bottles or packages before discarding them, and never put old pills down the toilet or drain unless the directions indicate it is OK to do so.
- Talk with your friends and extended family members about the harms of prescription and over-the-counter drug misuse, especially those whose houses your children visit. Encourage them to monitor their medications and to keep them in a safe place. Get to know the parents of your children's friends, a great way to find out if other families share your values when it comes to expectations and rules.

For parenting resources, please contact Oregon Partnership, a nonprofit that exists to end alcohol and drug abuse, at 503-244-5211 or orpartnership.org. To learn more about preventing youth prescription drug abuse, log on to www.theantidrug.com, where many of the above tips originated.