

Tips for Year-Round Prescription Safety for All Ages

The New Jersey Poison Information & Education System (NJPIES)

Serving New Jersey Since 1983

Get the Facts. Medication abuse is on the rise in the U.S.

Clean out Medicine Cabinets Annually. Set a date to review and sort all medicine cabinet contents.

Locks Are Key. Lock medicine cabinets to limit access to all medications.

Keep All Medications Away from Children. Young children easily mistake medications for candy.

Differentiate Medications for Seniors. Seniors with poor vision can easily make catastrophic mistakes.

Talk to Teens. “Pharming” is a growing trend for teens looking for cheap highs.

Hot Line Is First Line of Defense. Program and post the NJPIES hot line number (1-800-222-1222) in and near all phones.

Medication abuse is on the rise in the U.S., with national health officials increasingly prioritizing abuse and misuse of prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) medications as a key public health issue.¹ The situation is also of concern in New Jersey, where state data from the New Jersey Poison Information & Education System shows that reported poison incidences involving prescription and OTC medications have risen from 38% of all reported exposures in 2000 to 47.7% in 2008.

“Even though they don’t fall under the Controlled Substance Act, prescriptions are, by definition, controlled substances,” explained Dr. Steven Marcus, executive and medical director of NJPIES. “Prescriptions are given by a physician to a specific person for a limited time in a defined dose, and they can be very toxic if used in any other way than prescribed. No one would keep heroin and cocaine in the medicine cabinet, but inadvertently, homes are havens for drug abuse due to the increasing number of controlled prescription medications on hand in the average home.” Parents, he explains, have been educated about the dangers of street drugs, but the more obvious risks associated with sedatives and stimulants in the home are being overlooked. New studies, high-profile celebrity cases such as the recent deaths of Heath Ledger and Michael Jackson and increased public education are alerting the public to the perils of prescription drugs, both as readily available controlled substances and as toxins, when overused or when combined with other prescriptions and unregulated OTC medications.

Problem for All Ages

In her testimony before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, Nora Valkow, director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, noted that seven of the top 11 drugs most commonly abused by high school seniors are either prescribed or purchased over the counter. “Parents are not addressing the problem because they aren’t aware of it,” noted Dr. Marcus. A 2008 New Jersey study conducted by the Partnership for a Drug-Free New Jersey found that 44% of New Jersey parents knew little or nothing about the dangers of prescription drug abuse. Teen abuse is only one of several concerns about home drug availability, according to NJPIES. The problem is one of all ages.

— Seniors are vulnerable because they are prescribed more medications. Increased availability plus mix-ups due to either poor vision or inadvertent combinations of medications put seniors at increased risk.

— Adults aged 40-49 account for half of all documented cases of prescription drug abuse, according to a study by Medco Health Solutions, Inc., in Franklin Lakes, N.J.

— From January to April 2009, NJPIES received more than 90 calls for assistance with teens who had exposed themselves to medications in order to get high. The majority of these calls involved prescription and OTC medications.

Locks Are Key

“As with most public health issues, the key is prevention, and an easy way to prevent prescription drug abuse as well as mishaps with OTC medications is a simple lock,” stated Dr. Marcus. He advocates for medicine cabinet locks being required safety precautions in every home, similar to smoke and carbon monoxide detectors. He recognizes that most American homes, by design, have open medicine cabinets, but he strongly advocates that the practice be reevaluated in light of growing and disturbing information about unnecessary deaths and toxic incidences in the home. Take the following instances:

- Nationally, poison control centers have found that analgesics top the list, at 12.9%, as the most frequently reported toxic substance to which callers have been exposed. In comparison, stimulants and street drugs were cited in only 1.9% of reported cases.
- 70% of people who abuse prescription pain relievers say they got the drugs from friends or relatives.
- Upward of nine million people are reported to use prescription medications for nonmedical uses.
- New Jersey is one of 16 states where the number of deaths due to drugs is higher than the number of deaths from vehicular accidents.

New Jersey Leads Prevention Efforts

New Jersey has taken an aggressive posture in combating the growing problem. On Nov. 14, 2009, New Jersey will become the first state in the nation to coordinate a statewide effort to rid homes of unwanted and unneeded drugs of all types. NJPIES, with its long history of efforts to educate the public about the dangers of drugs in the home, will supply educational material to more than 250 collection sites around the state. “This call to action is an excellent reminder to residents to cleanse homes of potential medicinal toxins, but the effort should not stop there,” noted Alicia Gambino, director of public education for NJPIES. “This exciting effort is long overdue, and it should serve as a wake-up call for New Jersey residents to take aggressive actions to keep their families safe year-round.”

As New Jersey's only poison control center, NJPIES is passionate about preventing unnecessary deaths and toxic exposures. Prescription drug and OTC medication abuse is just one of the dangers the center tracks and hopes to prevent through better public education efforts. Information and public alerts are available on the center's Web site, and public education brochures and magnets are just a few of the items the center provides to organizations, schools and events working to improve public safety and health.

For any questions regarding suspected poisons, including reactions to prescription or OTC drugs, call the NJPIES hot line (**1-800-222-1222**) as a first line of defense. Trained medical professionals are on staff 24/7 to provide information and advice. To have information at your fingertips, officials recommend putting the number in all family cell phones as well as programming it as a speed-dial number on landlines and prominently posting it near home phones.