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For people who misuse pharmaceuticals

Reducing harms from pharmaceutical misuse

Introduction

This fact sheet provides information about issues related to reducing the risk of harm associated with the misuse of pharmaceuticals. It is not meant to be a substitute for professional advice. Talk to an alcohol and other drug worker, your local user group, needle and syringe program worker, your doctor or other health professional for more information and if you have any problems or questions.

Be informed

Do your research and make sure you have accurate and factual information about the pharmaceutical drug you are using, or considering using, and the risks associated with its misuse. Make sure the information comes from a reputable and knowledgeable source—there are many myths about drug use and some of these can be dangerous. Friends and the Internet are not always reliable sources of information.

Know what is in the pharmaceutical

- › What are the active ingredients and how much is in a dose?
- › What other ingredients are included? Pharmaceuticals contain other substances that can be harmful if misused. For example, some substances used in tablets can damage blood vessels if injected.

What are the potential risks associated with pharmaceutical misuse?

- › What are the effects of taking larger doses?
- › How is the pharmaceutical supposed to be taken (e.g. swallowed) and what are the risks associated with taking it another way (e.g. snorted or injected)?
- › Can you become dependent on the pharmaceutical? What are the expected withdrawal symptoms? Some medicines, such as benzodiazepines, can have quite dangerous withdrawal symptoms and withdrawal should be carried out under medical supervision.
- › Are there any other risks?

Be aware of potential interactions

Other medicines, illegal drugs, alcohol and even some foods can interact with pharmaceutical drugs and may increase the risk of overdose, or increase the likelihood of side effects and adverse reactions. Using more than one type of pharmaceutical or drug (polydrug use), either deliberately or by accident can result in unpredictable and potentially dangerous effects.

For example:

- › naltrexone blocks the effects of codeine and other opioids.
- › taking codeine with some medicines, such as sedatives, certain antidepressants and certain antihistamines can increase the sedative effects and reduce the breathing rate.
- › drinking alcohol or using barbiturates, heroin, methadone or other opioids while using benzodiazepines can increase the risk of overdose, dramatically slow the breathing rate and may even result in death.

Pharmaceuticals do not have to be taken at the same time to interact, some pharmaceuticals stay in the body after the effects have worn off and can affect other substances taken hours later.

Do you really know what you are taking?

Is the pharmaceutical damaged or too old?

If the pharmaceutical is out-of-date, has not been stored properly, or has changed colour, odour or consistency its potency and ingredients may be affected. It may even be toxic.

Where did the pharmaceutical come from?

It is important to know exactly what you are considering taking so you can weigh up the risks and make an informed decision.

In Australia, the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) has strict regulations about the quality of pharmaceuticals. Pharmaceuticals purchased overseas or via the Internet may not have the same

quality assurance. You may even be purchasing fake pharmaceuticals that do not have the correct ingredients or may even contain dangerous substances.

Be aware of the effects on driving ability

Some medicines can make a person drowsy and affect coordination, reaction times, vision and decision making skills. This can affect a person's ability to drive or operate heavy machinery safely. These effects can increase with larger doses or if alcohol or medicines or other drugs are also taken, further increasing the risk of an accident.

Do not share

Do not share pharmaceuticals

Everyone is different and will respond to pharmaceuticals differently. Body size, age, metabolism, hormones, medical history and other pharmaceuticals can all influence the way a pharmaceutical works. Just because you did not have an adverse reaction to the pharmaceutical does not mean that someone else won't.

Do not share equipment and gear

Sharing equipment that is used to take pharmaceuticals can increase the risk of contracting viruses such as hepatitis B, hepatitis C and HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus—the virus that causes AIDS). This not only includes needles, syringes and other equipment used for injecting, but also equipment used for snorting and smoking.

Use safe injecting practices

Injecting any pharmaceutical or drug carries an increased risk of harms such as overdose, damaged or collapsed veins; red, swollen and infected skin; organ damage; amputation of limbs due to poor circulation; stroke and the transmission of blood-borne viruses. The risks of harm are increased when pharmaceuticals that were not intended for injecting are injected.

For example, pills or tablets that are made to be swallowed may contain ingredients that do not easily break down in water and may cause damage if injected. These insoluble particles can block small blood vessels, cutting blood flow to cells, which can rot and die. Insoluble particles can also result in harmful deposits in the larger blood vessels, eyes, lungs and other organs.

More information about safer injecting is available from needle and syringe programs and in material such as

The Safer Injecting Handbook, available through the Australian Drug Foundation (tel. 1300 85 85 84 or www.bookshop.adf.org.au).

Keep pharmaceuticals and equipment in a safe place

Are they stored safely?

Pharmaceuticals and any associated equipment, such as syringes and needles, should be stored out of children's sight and reach. If you carry them with you in your handbag or briefcase make sure they are also kept out of children's reach.

Are they stored according to their directions?

Pharmaceuticals must be stored according to their directions. Things such as heat, humidity and sunlight can affect the medicines' quality and effectiveness. Some medicines can become toxic if they are not stored properly.

Look after yourself

Your body may be under a lot of pressure and strain as it copes with the effects of the pharmaceuticals. Allow your body to recover and try to get enough sleep, eat plenty of healthy foods and exercise regularly.

Responding to emergencies

If someone overdoses or has an adverse reaction to a medicine, it is very important that they receive professional help as soon as possible. Call an ambulance. Ambulance officers are not obliged to involve the police. Do not delay because you think you might get into trouble.

Seek help and more information

Contact a health professional or specialist service for treatment options or further information about reducing the risk of harms associated with the misuse of pharmaceuticals and other drugs.

More information and support is available from:

- › Your doctor, pharmacist or other health professional
- › You local needle and syringe program
- › CounsellingOnline, www.counsellingonline.org.au
- › Directline, tel. 1800 888 236
- › Australian Injecting and Illicit Drug Users' League (AIVL), www.aivl.org.au
- › VIVAIDS, www.vivaid.org.au
- › DrugInfo Clearinghouse, tel. 1300 85 85 84, www.druginfo.adf.org.au

More information

For more information on drugs and drug prevention contact the DrugInfo Clearinghouse on tel. 1300 8585 84, email druginfo@adf.org.au, or see our website www.druginfo.adf.org.au