

PRESCRIPTION DRUG ABUSE

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It seems everyone has an opinion about NFL star Terrell Owens' recent drug overdose (was it accidental, as he claims, or a suicide attempt related to a relationship break-up, or just another attention-grabbing stunt?) but the facts are these: he had recently had surgery for an injury, was prescribed a popular pain reliever, Vicodin, and he took more than the prescribed dose, enough to give the police cause to take him to the hospital.

Could he have taken enough pills to kill himself, accidentally or not? Most definitely, given the amount in the bottle he had. In fact, his celebrity status makes this news, but the real news is that **prescription painkillers like his cause more lethal drug overdoses than either cocaine or heroin**. U. S. emergency room records show that from 1990 to 2002 the mortality rate from "unintentional drug poisoning" increased by more than 200 percent. Most of those deaths involved middle-aged men.

The non-medical use and abuse of prescription medications, particularly pain relievers, has reached an unprecedented level in our society. Results of a 2004 national survey indicate that about 6 million Americans age 12 and older, which represents 2.5 percent of the population, used prescription medications for non-medical purposes.

Abuse of prescription drugs is a serious problem among teens seeking a new "high" (9% of 12 graders report use of Vicodin without a prescription, and 5% report using Oxycontin, a powerful prescription opiate drug) and is increasing among the elderly, who are more likely to forget or get confused about how many or which of their many different medications they've taken.

Two relatively recent phenomena have contributed to this crisis: first, there is a new trend among doctors to treat chronic pain more aggressively, with stronger medications and higher doses, due to a growing recognition that pain impedes recovery from illness. Potent new drugs like Oxycontin are showing up in home medicine cabinets throughout the country, and are also being "diverted" to the street where they may be sold for \$50-80 a pill.

The other phenomenon is occurring through the Internet, where anyone with a credit card can purchase unlimited quantities of almost any medication they desire, without having to see a doctor to obtain a legitimate prescription, and without any monitoring. And if that isn't dangerous enough, many of these "Internet pharmacies" are not FDA-approved, and may be selling medications that are counterfeit, outdated or improperly manufactured.

All prescription painkillers and tranquilizers have the potential for abuse/addiction (despite what some doctors and most ads will tell you). When used as prescribed, the risk of addiction is fairly low, however tolerance does develop over time, resulting in decreased effectiveness. These medications are most effective when used for short periods of time (e.g. after surgery), or on an infrequent basis (e.g. for occasional panic attacks or insomnia).

"Best practices" for use include: a) start with the smallest dose and increase gradually, b) inform your doctor promptly if a medication doesn't seem to be working, c) monitor your meds to prevent unauthorized use/theft, d) never give someone else medication prescribed for you, and e) know the signs of abuse and addiction. For more information, contact me at:

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