

"Pharming" – The Latest Trend in Teen Partying

By Karen Donaldson, M.S., R.D., L.D.

Priding myself on keeping up with the latest teen lingo, when I first heard the term "pharm party", I thought it likely meant an underage drinking party at someone's farm, out in the middle of nowhere. How wrong I was.

"Pharm," as it turns out, is short for pharmaceuticals, such as the powerful painkillers Vicodin and OxyContin. It seems that one of the latest trends is for teens and young adults to organize parties in order to consume random fistfuls of prescription drugs. According to an article by Donna Leinwand in the June 12, 2006 USA Today, it's a culture with its own lingo: Bowls and baggies of random pills often are called "trail mix," and on Internet chat sites, collecting pills from the family medicine chest is called "pharming." In the article, Carol Falkowski, director of research communications for the Hazelden Foundation, says young abusers of prescription drugs also have begun using the Internet to share "recipes" for getting high. Some websites are so simplistic, she says, that they refer to pills by color, rather than their brand names, content or potency. The parties, she says, may help explain the increase in teens and young adults showing up in the emergency room, overdosed on bizarre and potentially lethal combinations of pills.

According to John Raukar, _____, the method to the madness is simple: teens plan a party when parents are going to be gone, spread the word to gather drugs, dump handfuls of pills into a large bowl, and wash them down with a few drinks of alcohol. The drugs come from various sources. Teens may steal from prescription drugs around the home or at a grandparent's house, buy over-the-counter pills, or use their own prescriptions – like Ritalin. Unfortunately, the consequences are serious. Raukar knows of local high schoolers who have been hospitalized for "skittling", another slang term for mixing drugs of various colors. And, last year alone, Raukar said there were about 7 cases on kids overdosing on "Robo shakes" – a combination of Robitussin cough syrup and Dramamine. Hallucinations and convulsions are side effects.

For others, the consequences are fatal. Lisa Capiello, 39, of Brooklyn, N.Y., said that she knew her son, Eddie had tried marijuana at age 15 and sneaked beers at school. However, it wasn't until after he graduated that she realized the hold prescription drugs had on him. One day, Capiello's husband had to pick up their son when he fell asleep on a street corner waiting for a friend. Eddie later admitted he had taken 15 pills of Xanax, a brand name for a drug that acts as a sedative and that helped Eddie deal with anxiety and depression. Eddie was clean for 10 months after that, but later relapsed into weekend binging – taking 40 to 50 pills with a quart of Jack Daniel's. He did at age 22 after overdosing on a mix of pharmaceuticals.

"We were taken by surprise when we started to see a high instance of abuse of prescription drugs," says Nora Volkow, director of the National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA). Increasing availability may be a big reason for the rise in their abuse. Pharmaceutical companies' production of two often-abused prescription drugs — Hydrocodone and oxycodone, the active ingredients in drugs such as Vicodin and OxyContin — has risen dramatically as the drugs' popularity for legitimate uses has increased. Drug companies made 29 million doses of oxycodone in 2004, up from 15 million four years earlier. Hydrocodone doses rose from 14 million in 2000 to 24 million in 2004. After her son died, Capiello says she wondered how kids in her area were getting pills. She says she learned from police that one local dealer got Xanax from his mother, who had been given a prescription for the drug. Instead of taking the pills, she gave them to her son to sell for \$2 to \$3 each.

Raukar sees Pharm parties as a big problem in our community. "Any problem involving drugs is a big problem" he states. And he urges parents to pay attention. If a teen start to display different or unusual behavior, changes friends, or becomes secretive, there may be a problem.

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