

HIGHLINE ADDICTION RECOVERY CENTER

Winter 2010

Prescription Opioid Addiction Q & A

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Q: What are opioids and how do people become addicted to them?

A: Opioids are a class of controlled substances that include commonly prescribed painkillers such as oxycodone, hydrocodone, morphine, methadone, and hydromorphone. Brand names of these drugs include Oxycontin, Percocet, Vicodin, and Dilaudid. Despite the fact that physicians prescribe them, they are highly addictive, chemically similar to heroin, and can cause fatal overdose. Not everyone who uses them becomes addicted, and they are necessary for use in appropriate cases of severe pain, so the solution is not simply to ban them and take them off the market. Doctors, patients, and people in general must instead understand the dangers involved in their use by legitimate prescription, and those obtaining and using them illegally should be guided towards addiction treatment.

Q: Who is at greatest risk of becoming addicted to prescription opioids?

A: Those with a personal history, past or present, of addiction to ANY substance, including alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, methamphetamines, sedatives, and even nicotine, are known to be at much greater risk of developing problems with opioids, even when they are taking them by prescription for a legitimate pain issue. Even though all of these listed classes of drugs have different effects on mood and behavior, there are parts of the brain that are commonly affected by all substances of abuse, so an individual with a history of abusing one substance is at greater risk of abusing another due to long-lasting changes to

the brain that occur with addiction. Also, due to the known influences of genetics on addiction, those with a family history of any alcohol and drug problems are at increased risk of abusing prescription painkillers. Of course, those who are obtaining them illegally for recreational use are very likely to find themselves addicted and unable to function without them once they start taking them daily. Lastly, those with mental health problems like history of trauma (PTSD), anxiety or depressive disorders, or bipolar disorder are also at higher risk due to the “numbing” effect of the drugs and the tendency for these individuals to try to “self-medicate” their unwanted psychological symptoms.

Q: How common is opioid addiction?

A: Unfortunately, abuse of painkillers is currently reaching epidemic levels and is our nation’s fastest-growing and deadliest addiction issue. These drugs are now widely available through street sources, and studies have shown that 10% of high school seniors have abused them over the past year (NIDA 2008 study). At Highline, we have seen this rapid growth first-hand, with the number of patients admitted for detoxification and treatment of opioid dependence increasing exponentially in the past several years, most notably in the 17-25 age group.

Q: How does the Highline Addiction Recovery Center treat patients with opioid addiction?

A: The first step is always a thorough drug and alcohol assessment, which includes not only a complete history of past and present substance abuse, but also review of all medical and/or psychiatric issues, current