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Don't Be An Unintentional Drug Dealer: The Risks and Consequences of Prescription Opioid Misuse

Published in the Carroll County Times 8/17/18 as "Health Department: Risks, Consequences of Prescription Opioid Misuse"

By Michelle McVay, Substance Abuse Prevention Coordinator at Carroll County Health Department

It's hard to turn on the television or open a newspaper these days without seeing something about the opioid epidemic happening in our country. Many people know that opioid-related deaths have increased dramatically in Carroll County and across the state of Maryland over the past several years. Maryland Department of Health recently released data indicating that in Carroll County alone, 55 people died of overdose in 2017, and of those deaths more than 90% were related to opioids such as heroin and fentanyl.

Carroll County is working hard to prevent drug abuse and overdose, promote recovery, and support families impacted by addiction. But what precautions can we take in our daily lives to decrease the risk that we or someone close to us will experience opioid addiction or overdose?

One risk factor is prescription opioid misuse. Prescription opioids include pain medications like oxycodone, hydrocodone, codeine, and others. These medications go by many names and are prescribed for many types of pain. Dependence (feeling withdrawal symptoms when not taking the drug) and addiction (continuing to use despite negative consequences) are potential risks when taking prescription opioids, and the risks increase when these medications are misused.

How Prescription Opioids Are Misused

- Taking someone else's prescription, even if it is for a legitimate medical purpose like relieving pain.
- Taking an opioid medication in a way other than prescribed—for instance, taking more than your prescribed dose or taking it more often, or crushing pills into powder to snort or inject the drug.
- Taking the opioid prescription to get high.
- Mixing them with alcohol or certain other drugs. Your pharmacist can tell you what other drugs are safe to use with prescription pain relievers.

Prescription opioids and heroin are chemically similar and can produce similar effects. In some places, heroin is cheaper and easier to get than prescription opioids, so some people switch to using heroin instead. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), nearly 80% of Americans who use heroin reported misusing prescription opioids before using heroin. Avoiding prescription opioid misuse is an important step in preventing heroin and other opioid addiction.

Friends and family are the biggest source of misused prescription opioids in the United States. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), **more than 65%** of people who misuse prescription pain medications say they got them from a friend or relative. By keeping your medications secure and not sharing them with anyone, you can help prevent prescription opioid misuse.

Steps to Prevent Opioid Misuse and Overdose

- Take medication only as prescribed and only take medication prescribed for you.
- Do not take more than instructed; call a doctor if your pain worsens.
- Never share your medication with others.
- Talk to your doctor about the risks of any medications you may be prescribed.
- Never mix pain medications with alcohol or sleeping pills.
- Store your medication in a safe place out of the reach of children and out of sight, preferably in a locked box and not in a medicine cabinet.
- Clear the cabinet: dispose of unused or expired medication promptly and at designated drop-off locations.
- Never take prescription medications purchased on the street: counterfeit pills disguised to look like commonly-abused medications may contain deadly fentanyl.
- Get trained in naloxone and learn how to respond to an overdose, and encourage your friends and family to do the same.
- Don't Run, Call 911! Maryland's Good Samaritan Law protects people who seek medical assistance after witnessing or experiencing an overdose.

When someone dies of an overdose, the entire community is affected. The 55 people who lost their lives to drug overdose in Carroll County in 2017 represent parents who buried children, children who lost parents, spouses and friends and coworkers who are now without a person who was important to them. We all have a role in fighting the opioid epidemic - by taking steps to prevent opioid misuse and overdose, you can make a difference in our community.

For more information, please visit www.CleartheCabinet.com and www.ItsNeverWorthIt.com.