

Lesson 8

The Safe, Legal Use of
Prescription Medications
and Risks of Misuse



PROJECT
ALERT

Lesson Overview

Lesson Goals

1. Explain the safe, legal use of prescription opioids, and other prescription drugs, and explain how misuse can become addictive or life-threatening
2. Provide students with resistance skills and self-efficacy to refuse and resist the misuse of prescription drugs

Scope and Sequence with Pacing Guidance

1. Introduce Lesson (1 min.)
2. Teen Brain Development and Prescription Medication Safety (15 min.)
3. Describe Prescription Opioids and Fentanyl (8 min.)
4. Case Study: Ollie's Injury (8 min.)
5. Prepare and Act Out Skits (10 min.)
6. Wrap-Up (2 min.)

Brief Lesson Description

This lesson explains the safe and legal use of prescription medications and addresses the risks of misuse, especially misuse of prescription opioids, and the risks of fentanyl. This lesson continues to model real-life situations where students could be offered substances, such as prescription drugs, and ways to say “no” to build students’ knowledge, skills and self-efficacy.

Background Knowledge: Pre-Reading

Prescription Opioids

What Are Prescription Opioids?

Prescription opioids are drugs that are used to treat pain and discomfort. They are often referred to as prescription “pain medicine,” “pain killers,” or “pain meds.” They are regulated medications that are usually manufactured in an **approved lab**. They should only be used when prescribed by a doctor. The most common prescription opioids are in pill form, and include names like oxycodone (OxyContin®, Percocet®), hydrocodone (Vicodin®), oxymorphone (Opana®), morphine (Kadian®, Avinza®), codeine and fentanyl.

How Do Prescription Opioids Make People “High”?

Prescription pain medicine goes directly to the brain to **reduce the body’s perception of pain**. Painful sensations are replaced with other feelings or what is sometimes called a “high.” When someone keeps taking the drug over a long period of time, the body needs **more and more of it** to feel the effects.

Why Might Teens Use Prescription Opioids?

Sometime doctors prescribe these medicines for teens to help them with physical pain. Athletes may be prescribed them to help with the pain of a **sports injury**. Teens may also be prescribed them for the pain of **migraines or menstrual cramps**. While most people do not use prescription painkillers, some teens may be curious to use them.

Why Is It Dangerous to Use Prescription Drugs Not Prescribed to You?

The most important reason for not using prescription drugs that aren’t prescribed for you is that the drugs can be **deadly**. An overdose of opioids can **cut off your breathing** and result in **brain damage** and **death, even with only one dose**. And, unfortunately, these drugs are easy to overdose.

Prescription pain medications come in many forms and strengths, and the correct dosage that a doctor prescribes is different for every person. The only painkillers you should ever take should be prescribed by your doctor, purchased from a pharmacy, and taken according to your doctor's instructions while you are under their care.

Sometimes, these drugs are made in illegal labs. Painkillers that are purchased on the internet, on the street, or from someone you know are considered illegal. They are very dangerous because it is not known what is actually in them. Many teens do not know what is actually in them, what the drugs are for, or which pills are more powerful than others. They also don't know what dosages are dangerous and how these drugs react when combined with other drugs, such as alcohol, marijuana, or stimulants. **Combining drugs is extremely dangerous** and can affect doing simple tasks, or can cause death from stroke, heart attack, or respiratory failure (**inability to breathe**).

Are There Other Effects Besides Pain Relief or a "High"?

Yes. Prescription opioids **slow down your breathing**, which can send too little oxygen to your brain making you tired or **confused**, and they can cause constipation and **nausea**.

Are Prescription Opioids Addictive?

Yes. Using prescription opioids can lead to developing a dependence on the drug and **addiction very quickly**. The more often someone uses these drugs, the larger the dose they need the next time to get the same effect. Because of this, doctors are very careful when prescribing these drugs and only prescribe a dose that will work **for a specific patient and for a short period of time**. If these drugs are used in a way that is different from these instructions, it is considered illegal.

Continued use of these drugs produces both mental and physical cravings, dependency, and addiction. Mental symptoms of taking the drug away include depression and anxiety. Physical symptoms of withdrawal from an addiction include stomach cramps, aches, sweating, chills, nausea, shaking, and trouble sleeping.

Fentanyl

What Is Fentanyl?

Fentanyl is a potent synthetic opioid that is up to 100 times stronger than morphine (a prescription opioid) and 50 times stronger than heroin (an illegal opioid). Fentanyl has contributed to an increase in drug overdose deaths in the United States. Even a very small amount of fentanyl can be deadly.

Why Might Someone Use Fentanyl?

Pharmaceutical fentanyl might be prescribed by a doctor to treat someone for complex pain conditions, such as advanced cancer. However, illicitly manufactured fentanyl is illegally distributed because it is chemically similar to other opioids and can produce a high. Fentanyl is often mixed with other drugs because of its extreme potency, making drugs cheaper, more powerful, more addictive, and more dangerous. Someone might not even know there is fentanyl in a drug.

Heroin

What Is Heroin?

Heroin is an opioid drug processed from morphine. Heroin is a very addictive. It is an **illegal** drug usually sold as a white or brownish powder. **Most people do not use** heroin, but sometimes when a person is addicted to opioids, they may start using heroin for its effects. It is illegal to purchase or use heroin whether you are a teen or an adult.

How Does Heroin Affect the Body?

Like other opioids, heroin affects the brain and briefly prevents the brain from perceiving pain. There can be a brief "high" of pleasant feelings, followed by feeling very sleepy and then feeling wide awake. When someone keeps using opioids, they need more and more of it to feel the same effects and to function normally; this is addiction. Any person who uses opioids can become addicted, and sometime become addicted very quickly.

Safety

What are the Overdose Risks of Prescription Opioids, Fentanyl, or Heroin?

Synthetic opioids are the most common drugs involved in overdose deaths. Prescription opioids should only be taken as prescribed by a doctor, never shared with someone else, and never mixed with other drugs. Using an illegal opioid just one time is dangerous enough to cause an overdose and death because they are often mixed with other substances and there is no proof of what is actually in them, or the strength (or potency). Opioid overdose can occur from misusing any type of opioid, and it is life-threatening and requires immediate emergency care. Opioid overdose causes breathing and heartbeat to slow or stop completely.

What Can Be Done for an Opioid Overdose?



A person experiencing an opioid overdose needs emergency care immediately to prevent death. Call 911 immediately; follow their instructions and possibly begin CPR if the person has stopped breathing. If available, treat the person with naloxone. Naloxone can be a life-saving medication that can reverse an overdose from opioids if given correctly and in time to prevent death. Naloxone is an opioid receptor antagonist that binds to the brain to temporarily block the effects of other opioids.

Materials and Supplies to Prepare

- **Visual** - Ground Rules: Students (saved from Lesson 1)
- **Visual** - Poster 9: Ways to Say “No”
- **Visual** - Poster 11: Prescription Drugs Go Straight to Your Head
- **Materials** - Video: *Let’s Talk About Prescription Medication Safety*
- **Handout** - Copies of Be Smart, Be Safe: Guidelines for Prescription Pain Medications, Optional
- **Handout** - Copies of Prescription Opioids, Fentanyl, and Heroin: Information for Educators and Youth, Optional

Legend

We use the icons below to indicate what to say during the lesson, what to keep in mind as you facilitate the lesson, and what to display in the classroom throughout the lesson.

What to say	What to keep in mind	What to display
		

Lesson Plan

1. Introduce Lesson



Display visual created in Lesson 1: *Student Ground Rules*



We've covered quite a bit of material in Project ALERT. Today, we are going to talk about the safe use versus misuse of prescription drugs. We'll cover a few types of prescription drugs but talk most about a particular type called opioids (pr: ō'pē-oids).

We'll watch a video and discuss teen brain development and how certain drugs affect the brain, and why they can be so addictive. Then, we will practice resistance skills in skits as we often do in Project ALERT lessons.

2. Teen Brain Development and Prescription Medication Safety



To start, let's talk about the brain. The human brain is very complex and controls our movement, thoughts, and bodily functions. The brain is our body's control center or 'computer', and it takes a long time to fully mature.

Your brain isn't fully developed until around age 25. You can't feel your brain changing, but your brain is super busy building circuits and programming.

Using this control center analogy, our experiences can make or break short-distance connections between brain cells. By guiding the creation of circuits, experiences shape our perceptions, memories, and things that makes us unique.

Our experiences also affect our brain across longer distances. This involves the building of connections like thick bundles of fibers linking different brain regions. By creating this complex network of connections, our experiences help increase the brain's bandwidth, allowing it to work better and better.

In teen brains, experiences can affect connections in big ways. While your brains are in the middle of development, misusing drugs can cause real problems that can last a long time.

Other experiences that influence your brain's development include sleep, hobbies, exercise, and nutrition. So, you should keep in mind, every decision, things you do and things that happens to you, influence how your brain develops.

Now, we are going to watch a video to hear about how certain prescription drugs affect the brain and about the importance of using prescription medications appropriately and safely.



Show Video: *Let's Talk About Prescription Medication Safety*



The video explained three types of prescription drugs:

1. **Prescription opioids** which are prescribed by doctors to medically treat pain by interfering with pain messages sent to the brain.
2. **Prescription sedatives** which are prescribed by doctors to medically treat anxiety, stress, and seizure disorders by slowing down normal brain function.
3. **Prescription stimulants** which are prescribed by doctors to medically treat depression, obesity, and ADHD by speeding up normal brain and body functions like heart rate and blood pressure.

These prescription drugs affect the brain. Doctors' instructions are unique to the person and medical treatment. Therefore, what are the important safety precautions for the safe and legal use of prescription drugs?

Answers are:

1. Follow your doctor's instructions,
2. Don't mix medication with alcohol or other drugs, and
3. Don't share prescription drugs.

Very good. And who can remind us at what age does the brain mature?

Answer: Around age 25

Good, important brain development is happening up to age 25. The brain is still building its 'circuits and programming,' if we use the computer analogy, as it matures and makes new connections. What can you do to keep your brain healthy and developing to its full potential?

Answers might include: no drugs, using prescription drugs safely, eating healthy, exercise, sleep, learning, and hobbies.

Are these things you have control over and can choose to do? What other helpful activities can you think of?

Great. You can use this information to make your own choices to keep our brain protected and healthy.

3. Describe Prescription Opioids and Fentanyl



As we know, prescription opioids are drugs that are prescribed to treat pain and discomfort. They can be referred to as prescription “pain killers,” or “pain meds.” They are regulated medications that are usually manufactured in an approved lab. They should only be used when prescribed by a doctor. The most common prescription opioids include names like oxycodone, hydrocodone, morphine, and fentanyl (pr: fen’ ta nil).

Prescription opioids go directly to the brain to reduce the body’s perception of pain. Sometimes doctors prescribe these medicines for teens to help them with physical pain. These drugs come in many forms and strengths, and the correct dosage that a doctor prescribes is unique to the person. The most important reason for not using prescription opioids that aren’t prescribed for you is that the drugs can be deadly. An overdose of opioids can cut off breathing and result in brain damage and death, even with only one dose.

Heroin is an opioid processed from morphine. It is illegal to purchase or use heroin whether you are a teen or an adult.

Fentanyl is a potent synthetic opioid that is up to 100 times stronger than morphine and 50 times stronger than heroin.

Pharmaceutical fentanyl might be prescribed by a doctor to treat someone for complex pain conditions like advanced cancer.

However, illicitly manufactured fentanyl is illegally sold because it is chemically similar to other opioids. Fentanyl is often mixed with other drugs and sold illegally because of its extreme potency and strength, making drugs cheaper, more powerful, more addictive, and more dangerous. Someone might not even know there is fentanyl in a drug.

Fentanyl has contributed to an increase in drug overdose deaths in the United States.



As we discussed in a previous lesson, based on nationwide data, if we had a room with 100 8th graders in it, there would be:

- **About 9 in 100 who used nicotine in the last month**
- **About 5 in 100 who used marijuana in the last month**
- **About 6 in 100 who used alcohol in the last month**

OK, if we think about teens who are up to age 17, and we had 100 teens aged 12 to 17, what do you think is the average number of teens aged 12 to 17 that had misused prescription pain medication in the last year?

(Elicit a few student responses.)

It's less than 3 in 100 who had misused prescription pain medication in the last year.

How many do you think have used heroin in the last year?

(Elicit a few student responses.)

It's much, much lower - it's less than one-tenth of 1%. Data shows that less than 1 in 1,000 adolescents have used heroin in the last year.

What do you think about these numbers? Are teens using these substances?

4. Case Study: *Ollie's Injury*



Display poster: Prescription Drugs Go Straight to Your Head



Now, we are going to talk through a case study, called *Ollie's Injury*, which is a story of a teen who has decisions to make about safe and proper use of a prescription drug. The teen in the story is named Ollie. There will be five "decision points" in the story where Ollie can choose an action to stay safe and healthy.



Keep in mind that this case study reinforces earlier lessons that address a person using a drug to cope with an emotion such as sadness, anger, or frustration, and the need to reach out for help if they are troubled and having a hard time handling difficult feelings and situations.



Before I begin reading the case study, we will divide into groups, and each group will choose a Recorder. For each of the five

decision points, your group will discuss Ollie's choices, what decisions could lead Ollie to prescription drug misuse, and what decisions could keep Ollie safe and healthy.

Divide students into groups; each group assigns a Recorder; and each group has a sheet of paper ready.



Let's begin.

Ollie is a high-school athlete. It looks like he will make varsity soccer this season, something for which he has worked very hard to achieve. It's the week before the season starts.

While Ollie is at a skate park, he takes a bad fall and breaks his arm. He wants to keep playing on the soccer team, but his arm hurts a lot, and his coach will not let him play.

Ollie goes to the doctor, and she tells him he can't play until his arm heals, and also says she is going to prescribe a prescription pain medication called Vicodin.

This is Decision Point #1: Whether or not to take Vicodin, a prescription medication to manage pain. What action can Ollie take to help keep him healthy and safe?

Give 1 minute for student groups to discuss, write a decision, and share out ideas.

What could Ollie do while talking to his doctor about the treatment plan?

Possible responses if not already stated:

- Ollie (or his parents) could tell his doctor about his concerns regarding use of prescription opioids and risk of addiction.
- He could ask if another non-opioid pain management could be used instead, or other things he can do to relieve pain if needed.
- Ollie ask questions about the doctor's instructions for safe use of prescription; he can follow instructions, and he can stay in communication with doctor (and his parents) about how he is feeling.

While prescription opioids can be part of a safe treatment if used appropriately, it's important to:

- 1) know the risks and take medications with caution,**
- 2) take them only under a doctor's guidance, and**
- 3) take them no longer than absolutely necessary.**

Ollie goes to watch his team play and feels sad because he can't be on the field. Each time he goes to a game he feels worse because

his doctor said he can't play for at least 4 more weeks, and his arm still hurts a little.

This is Decision Point #2: How to cope with feelings of sadness and mild pain. What action can Ollie take to help keep him healthy and safe?

Give 1 minute for student groups to discuss, write a decision, and share out ideas.



What could Ollie do to handle his sadness and the mild pain?

Possible responses if not already stated:

- Talk to coach about helpful things he can do for the team until he is cleared to play
- Start an exercise program to keep his legs strong and not lose fitness
- Do other activities that he enjoys that he is still able to do
- Talk to parents, coach, or counselor about his feelings

Ollie realizes when he takes the pills, he feels less emotional, and recently the arm pain is only mild now.

This is Decision Point #3: Whether or not to take prescription opioids when it's not necessary, or for something it is not prescribed for, like sadness or depression. What action can Ollie take to help keep him healthy and safe?

Give 1 minute for student groups to discuss, write a decision, and share out ideas.

What other ways could Ollie address his emotions and manage mild pain instead of using the pills his doctor prescribed?

Possible responses if not already stated:

- Use a non-opioid pain management medication since the pain is mild; manage mild pain without prescription drugs
- Talk to doctor about the injury changes and ask about treatment plan changes
- Talk to his doctor about his feelings
- Talk to a counselor or other adult about his feelings
- Exercise to help keep fit and make him feel better
- Do activities that he enjoys that he is still able to do

What might happen if Ollie chooses to keep taking the Vicodin his doctor prescribed when he doesn't really need it? How might his misuse impact his health, his grades, his relationships, his family, his future?

Possible responses if not already stated:

- Might develop an addiction; get into more trouble; grades and attendance may drop

- When he runs out of Vicodin, he might be tempted to try other drugs
- Family could become disrupted and hurt by his misuse

Ollie had renewed his prescription, Ollie finds that he has pills left over, but his arm does not hurt anymore.

This is Decision point #4: Whether to misuse prescription drugs or dispose of them. What action can Ollie take to help keep him healthy and safe?

Give 1 minute for student groups to discuss, write a decision, and share out ideas.



What should Ollie do with the pills since he no longer needs them for pain? If he keeps them around, do you think he or someone else might be tempted to misuse them?

Possible responses if not already stated:

- Find out the safest way to get rid of them (ask pharmacist, ask doctor's office)
- Tell doctor, parent, or other trusted adult that he does not need them and to get rid of them
- If Ollie is still having problems with feelings, see a counselor to get help

What might happen if Ollie chooses to keep taking pills when he doesn't really need them?

Possible responses if not already stated:

- Might develop an addiction
- When he runs out of Vicodin, he might turn to other drugs to satisfy the craving, as he is becoming addicted, or developing a substance use disorder

After taking the pills over 3-4 weeks, he realizes he wants and needs more, but his doctor will not renew his prescription. Ollie starts to feel anxious, irritated, and sick. At the skate park, Ollie runs into "JJ," who is a sort-of friend of his older cousin. He tells Ollie that he has some pills that will work just like the pain pills his doctor gave him. JJ says they're "safe," that they will make him feel just like Vicodin makes him feel, and they are cheap and easy to get. He offers them to Ollie.

This is Decision point #5: Whether or not to use the pills JJ offers. What action can Ollie take to help keep him healthy and safe?

Give 1 minute for student groups to discuss, write a decision, and share out ideas.

What might happen if Ollie chooses to use the pills from JJ?

Possible responses:

- Risks of using include legal trouble, addiction
- Hurt to self, family, friends, future
- Death from ingesting street pills that could be laced with fentanyl or other dangerous substances

Also know that JJ's actions are illegal.



What do you remember from previous Project ALERT lessons about addiction?

Student responses might include:

- the body building a tolerance to substance use and needing more to function,
- craving the substance,
- stopping use of the substance causes withdrawal symptoms, and
- trouble with family, friends, school, and other areas of life.



Using prescription opioids can lead to developing a dependence on the drug and addiction very quickly. The more often someone uses these drugs, the larger the dose they need the next time to get the same effect. Continued use of these drugs produces both mental and physical cravings, dependency, and addiction.

Because of this, doctors have guidelines when prescribing these drugs and only prescribe a dose that will work for a specific patient and for a short period of time. If these drugs are used in a way that is different from these instructions, it is considered illegal.

An overdose of opioids can cut off breathing and result in brain damage and death, even with only one dose. And, unfortunately, these drugs are easy to overdose.

Synthetic opioids are the most common drugs involved in overdose deaths. Using an illegal opioid prescription or illicitly manufactured opioid just one time is dangerous enough to cause an overdose and death because there is no proof of what is actually in them, if they are mixed with another dangerous substance, or the strength or potency of the drug. Opioid overdose can occur from misusing any type of opioid, and it is life-threatening and requires immediate emergency care. Opioid overdose causes breathing and heartbeat to slow or stop completely.

A person experiencing an opioid overdose needs emergency care immediately to prevent death. Call 911 immediately; follow their

instructions and possibly begin CPR if the person has stopped breathing.

If available, treat the person with naloxone. Naloxone can be a life-saving medication that can reverse an overdose from opioids if given correctly and in time to prevent death. Naloxone is an opioid receptor antagonist that binds to the brain to temporarily block the effects of other opioids.

5. Prepare and Act Out Skit



Display poster: Prescription Drugs Go Straight to Your Head, and
Display poster: Ways to Say “No”



Ok, let's do some roleplay skits and practice ways to say “no”.

We will divide into groups and choose a Recorder. On a sheet of paper, each group will come up with:

- 1. Two reasons not to misuse prescription drugs,**
- 2. Two different verbal responses you could give to someone who is trying to get you to misuse prescription drugs or use illegal opioids.**

Please write the actual words you could use – you can refer to the ‘Ways to Say No’ poster for ideas.”



Circulate as students work in groups.



When students have been working for about 4 minutes, give them an alert about time.

You have two more minutes to complete your skits.

After the next 2 minutes

Time is up – let’s hear one of your group’s reasons and the corresponding response your group has for saying “no”.

Who will volunteer as the first group?

Each group presents one reason and response skit.



Reinforce student engagement in the activity and praise their contributions.



Well done everyone!

6. Wrap-up Lesson



Today, we discussed the safe use versus misuse of prescription drugs. We learned about brain development and how the use of drugs impacts brain development and functioning. We continued to practice resistance skills. You are all getting strong and clear in your words and decisions not to use drugs and are able to resist pressures to use.

You can use these information and skills to make choices and decisions to keep our brain protected and healthy.