

Prescription Medication Misuse

Understanding the risks, the signs and where to get help

Prescription medication misuse can mean taking medicine in a different way from the instructions, taking a larger or more frequent dose, using somebody else's prescription, combining medicines unsafely, or increasingly relying on a medicine for effects beyond its intended purpose. It can happen gradually and may begin with a completely legitimate prescription. Dependence is not a moral failing, and it is not the same thing as deliberately seeking intoxication.

What may signal a developing problem

Possible signs include taking extra doses; running out early; feeling unable to cope without the medicine; repeatedly thinking about the next dose; seeking prescriptions from more than one source; using medication to change mood, sleep, confidence or emotional state; increasing tolerance; continuing despite side effects; hiding use; or experiencing withdrawal symptoms when a dose is delayed or reduced. Any concern deserves a medication review rather than shame or secrecy.

Tolerance, dependence and addiction are not identical

Tolerance The same dose produces less effect over time, so a person may feel drawn to increase it.	Physical dependence The body has adapted to regular use and withdrawal symptoms can occur if the medicine is reduced or stopped.
Misuse Medication is being used outside the prescribed or intended way, including unsafe combinations or doses.	Addiction A pattern of impaired control, craving and continued use despite significant harm. Not everyone who is physically dependent is addicted.

Medicines that may need particular care

Problems can occur with many medicines, but particular attention is often needed with opioid pain medicines, benzodiazepines and related sedatives, sleeping tablets, gabapentinoids, and prescribed stimulants. The risks differ between medicines. Sedating medicines can impair coordination, memory and breathing; stimulants can affect heart rate, blood pressure, sleep and anxiety. Combining medicines - or combining them with alcohol or non-prescribed drugs - can substantially change risk.

Do not stop some medicines suddenly

If you have been taking a medicine regularly, especially benzodiazepines, some sleeping medicines, opioids or certain other dependence-forming medicines, do not make an abrupt major change without appropriate medical advice. Withdrawal can be severe and, for some medicines, potentially dangerous. A GP, pharmacist or prescribing clinician can review the medication and discuss an individual, gradual plan when appropriate.

Overdose and urgent warning signs

Call **999** if someone is unconscious or cannot be woken, has severe breathing difficulty or very slow/shallow breathing, has a seizure, collapses, develops severe chest pain, becomes dangerously confused or agitated, or you suspect a serious overdose. Tell emergency services what may have been taken if you know. Do not delay seeking help because the medication was prescribed.

A safer first step

Write down the medicine, prescribed dose, what you are actually taking, when you take it, what you hope it will do, and any withdrawal or side effects you notice. Take this information to a GP, pharmacist or prescriber. If you are worried about being judged, you can simply begin with: 'My medication use has changed and I would like help reviewing it safely.'

Prescription Medication Misuse - Help and Support

Medication review, practical recovery support and UK routes to help

Where to get help

Prescriber / GP	Ask for a medication review. Be clear about what you are actually taking, including non-prescribed medicines, alcohol or other substances. This helps the clinician assess interactions, dependence and withdrawal risk.
Community pharmacist	A pharmacist can explain how a medicine should be taken, common interactions and side effects, and when a concern needs medical review. They can also help clarify confusing medication instructions.
Local drug & alcohol service	Community services can support people whose difficulties involve prescription or non-prescribed medicines as well as alcohol or illicit drugs. Many services accept self-referrals.
FRANK	Confidential UK drug information and advice. Helpline: 0300 123 6600 ; text 82111 . Information is also available about local support.
UK SMART Recovery	Free peer-support meetings using practical tools for managing urges, motivation and behaviour change. Online and face-to-face options are available.
NHS 111 / 999	Use NHS 111 for urgent medical advice where available. Call 999 for a medical emergency, serious overdose symptoms, collapse or severe breathing difficulty.

Understanding what the medication is doing for you

Complete these sentences: **I first started taking it because... Now I most want it when... The effect I am looking for is... The difficulty it now creates is... If that medicine changed, I would also need support with...** This matters because medication can become attached to pain, sleep, panic, trauma, sensory overwhelm, concentration, energy or emotional regulation. A safer plan needs to consider the original need as well as the medicine.

For family members and partners

Avoid confiscating medication or demanding an abrupt stop where dependence may be present. Encourage an honest medication review and, if the person agrees, help them prepare an accurate list of doses and symptoms. Keep firm boundaries around sharing prescriptions, driving while impaired, money and the safety of children or vulnerable adults. In an overdose or serious medical emergency, call 999.

One book to explore

***The Maudsley Deprescribing Guidelines: Antidepressants, Benzodiazepines, Gabapentinoids and Z-drugs* - Mark Horowitz and David Taylor.** This is a detailed clinical reference rather than a light self-help book, but I include it because it demonstrates why stopping dependence-forming medication can require careful, individual planning. It explains withdrawal and deprescribing principles in depth. I would use it to support informed conversations with clinicians, not as an instruction to create your own tapering schedule.

A message from Maggie

Sometimes the medication that originally helped can become something you feel frightened to be without. That can be confusing, particularly when it was prescribed for a genuine need. You are allowed to ask questions about tolerance, dependence, side effects or how your use has changed. You do not need to prove that you have an 'addiction' before asking for support. The safest next step may simply be an honest medication review and a plan that looks at you as a whole person.

Clinical note

This resource is educational and is not an individual tapering or prescribing plan. Medication changes should be discussed with an appropriately qualified clinician. Withdrawal and interaction risks vary by drug, dose, duration, health conditions and other substances or medicines being used. Service details can change and should be checked before publication.