

## Prescription drug abuse: Pain conditions can lead to addictions

Posted by [smchugh](#) August 20, 2009 09:45AM



**KALAMAZOO** -- Lisa was anticipating a typical life as a suburban wife and mother, but things didn't turn out as she planned.

Instead, the now-50-year-old area woman ended up getting seriously addicted to painkillers after a foot injury.

At one point, Lisa was taking 30 Vicodin pills a day, she said.

Joan, a 55-year-old lifelong Kalamazoo resident, says she became addicted to opiates, including Vicodin, Percocet and codeine, after some necessary surgeries. She simply went from doctor to doctor to land more drugs.

"I'd make up a medical reason to go to the doctor to get more," she said. "When one doctor got suspicious, I'd just pick a new doctor."

At one point, she was taking 20 Vicodin pills a day, along with Valium and a nightly bottle of wine. "I'm lucky I'm alive, to be honest with you," she said.

The two women, both of whom asked that their real names not be used, are part of a nationwide problem. According to the 2007 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, an estimated 6.9 million people ages 12 or older used prescription medications for nonmedical use in the month before being surveyed. That total included 5.2 million using pain relievers, 1.8 million using tranquilizers, 1.1 million using stimulants and 350,000 using sedatives.

In 2003, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reported that about one-third of all U.S. drug abuse is prescription-drug abuse.

Locally, as many as 30 percent of the patients in the inpatient and outpatient treatment at the Community Healing Centers are addicted to prescription drugs, said Sally Reames, executive director of the nonprofit substance-abuse-treatment agency. And many have "secondary" addictions to alcohol, she said, a potentially fatal combination.

### Repeated rehab

Lisa was already a recovering alcoholic when she became addicted to prescription drugs. She said her pill addiction was fed by the euphoria and energy she felt when she was on opiates -- highly addictive prescription pain medications that include the popular Vicodin and OxyContin.

Is someone you know addicted?

### Some possible signs that people are addicted to prescription drugs:

- They take more than what is prescribed and become anxious when they are almost out of pills.
- They seek prescriptions from multiple doctors and emergency rooms.
- They seek prescription refills early, and they lie, exaggerate or make excuses about why they ran out of the drug.
- They borrow or buy drugs from others.
- They take several similar types of the same drug at the same time.
- They have a constant preoccupation with the drug or feel they cannot live without the drug.
- They are unable to keep a supply of the drug for very long because of the incessant appetite for more.
- They begin to not care what happens to themselves, take risks and experience mood changes or depression.
- Their use of the drug negatively affects their relationships.
- They fail to respect obligations in order to use or obtain the drug.
- They drive under the influence.
- They experience withdrawal symptoms such as chills, sweats, nausea, diarrhea, aches and pains, anxiety and insomnia when they don't have access to the drugs.
- They engage in prescription fraud, altering prescriptions or stealing prescription pads.
- They steal drugs, money or things to sell to get money for drugs.

Source: Dr. Michael Liepman, professor of psychiatry at MSU Kalamazoo Center for Medical Studies and medical director of the Jim Gilmore Jr. Community Healing Center

### Where to get help

- Friends and family members of those with drug or alcohol addictions can call Lauren Longwell at the Community Healing Centers, (269) 343 1651, ext. 141. The centers offer a free Family & Friends group at 7 p.m. Tuesdays at the Jim Gilmore Jr. Community Healing Center, 1910 Shaffer St.

- People concerned about their own prescription-drug use can call Lynn Powell at the Jim Gilmore Jr. Community Healing Center, (269) 382-9820 ext 121.

- There also are many Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings throughout the area. To find AA meetings in your area, go to [www.aa.org](http://www.aa.org). To find NA meetings, go to [www.na.org](http://www.na.org).

Source: Sally Reames, executive director of the Community Healing Centers

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Her addiction caused a steep downward spiral that led to prescription fraud, drug court and court-ordered rehabilitation.

She was stealing her husband's fentanyl patches and other painkillers he needed for back pain, giving him nonprescription drugs in their place so he wouldn't know.

She had teeth pulled unnecessarily just to get pain medications.

She fabricated elaborate stories about medical problems and went to multiple doctors for prescriptions.

She went to doctor's offices near closing time to listen to nurses call in prescriptions. She picked up on the medical jargon and began calling in prescriptions for herself.

She got busted for this practice and went through the Kalamazoo Drug Court, avoiding jail time and instead ending up in rehab. She relapsed several times, going through seven rehab stints between 1994 and 2003.

She's been clean and sober for six years and is especially proud that unforeseen tragedy -- her husband recently died unexpectedly -- didn't lead her back to booze and pills.

## How it starts

People often mistakenly believe that prescription drugs are safe because a doctor is prescribing them, said Dr. Michael Liepman, a professor of psychiatry at Michigan State University Kalamazoo Center for Medical Studies and medical director of the Jim Gilmore Jr. Community Healing Center.

Many patients who end up addicted to prescription drugs start with a legitimate pain condition. They develop a high tolerance for the drug, and it takes more and more of it to achieve the same effect.

"Sometimes people think, 'If one pill makes me feel better, three will be better,'" said Dr. Richard Tooker, chief medical officer for Kalamazoo County.

In the case of pain killers derived from opium, increasing the amount taken can be deadly because these drugs decrease brain activity, breathing rates and heart rates.

"Take three pills and maybe you wake up feeling better, or take three pills and maybe you end up dead," Tooker said. "You're really playing Russian roulette with your life."

For some people, drugs as prescribed don't give a strong- or fast-enough high. So they start taking handfuls all at once, mixing them with other drugs, chopping up the pills and snorting the powder or injecting a liquid solution made from the pills, Liepman said.

A recent Kalamazoo County report shows that 64.3 percent of the 120 drug overdoses in the county between 2005 and 2008 were attributed to prescription and over-the-counter drugs, well above the 17.4 percent attributed to illegal drugs.

Reames said people who become physically and/or psychologically addicted to prescription drugs will go to great lengths to get the drugs. She knows of patients who have ordered large quantities of prescription drugs illegally over the Internet and others who have tapped into the thriving black market for these drugs, with dealers charging outrageous per-pill prices. She's also heard stories of "seekers" going to real-estate open houses to pilfer drugs from medicine cabinets.

## What gets abused

The prescription drugs that Reames has observed are most often abused are Vicodin, OxyContin and the anti-anxiety medication Xanax.

Liepman said he sees extensive addiction to opiate pain killers, anti-anxiety drugs such as Xanax, Klonopin and Ativan as well as abuse of drugs prescribed for attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. These ADHD drugs, which are stimulants, are abused for sports performance enhancement, to stay up late to study or to drive long distances without stopping.

## Help for withdrawal

Patients with physical addictions who decide to stop taking opiate drugs will go through withdrawal, which can be treated in an inpatient detox program. Opiate withdrawal can feel like a severe case of the flu, with hot and cold sweats, severe aches, anxiety, tremors, nausea and diarrhea, Liepman said.

Getting past drug withdrawal is a tremendously difficult but essential early part of the recovery process, Reames said.

Liepman said people trying to go off opiates sometimes need something else to help deal with the pain. Many addiction-savvy doctors will put patients on a drug called Suboxone, which is a less addictive opiate substitute that reduces cravings for opiates and provides pain relief, he said. It blocks the effects of other opiates so it prevents abuse. And if you take too much of it, it blocks itself.

It is easier for the recovering addict to manage this pain medicine than the other kinds they have abused, Liepman said.

## Clean for 16 years

For Joan, it was after she ended up divorced and lost her job that she sought help. She went through detoxification at a hospital and is now in a 12-step recovery program. She's been clean and sober since 1993.

"I had a hole, and I tried to fill that hole up with alcohol and with pain pills," she said. "Most people that get addicted to pain pills don't start out with the intention of getting addicted. Most start out with a legitimate medical reason. It works so well on the physical pain, you think, 'Why not have it work on the mental pain?'"

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