

# Teens swapping legal drugs at 'pharming' parties

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South Florida Sun-Sentinel

May. 5, 2006 12:00 AM

In so many ways it sounds like any other teenage party.

Kids gathered in an abandoned Florida warehouse where strobe lights flashed and liquor flowed. But then from pockets and purses, the pills appeared.

Vicodin. OxyContin. Xanax. All legal drugs destined for illegal use.

Shannon Johnson, 17, a middle-school dropout, was part of the scene. He popped four or five Xanax, washed them down with vodka and was ready to party.

Not so long ago, kids raided their parents' liquor cabinet when they wanted a quick high.

Today, it's the medicine cabinet.

They're stocking up for "pharming parties," get-togethers sans parents where teens barter legal drugs and get high.

"It's better when you're with other people," says Shannon, a slender youth, lost in a pair of baggy jeans and oversized shirt. "I don't like doing this by myself."

There's nothing new about kids abusing prescription drugs. But pharming parties are a new social twist that contribute to the growing problem of prescription drug abuse, which has worked its way into pop culture via message boards, song lyrics and even T-shirts.

The number of users has mushroomed even as use of illegal drugs, such as heroin and marijuana, has decreased, according to a report by Columbia University's National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse.

The center says that about 2.3 million kids, 12 to 17, took prescription drugs illegally in the past year, based on 2003 figures. That's a whopping 212 percent increase from 1992.

Shannon tumbled into the drug world at 10 with his first puff of marijuana. He's tried a cornucopia of drugs since, including Xanax from the family medicine cabinet, he says. But the kids who snag the family's pills share no cookie-cutter look.

"There's no specific group you can pinpoint," says Doris Carroll, community coordinator of the Palm Beach County (Fla.) Substance Abuse Coalition. "It's not just dropouts. It's

not just popular kids. It's not just football players."

Much of the problem is linked to easy access, she says.

Indeed, some kids come by the drugs legally. Maybe they're taking Ritalin for attention deficit disorder or painkillers after losing their wisdom teeth or breaking a bone.

Others pillage medicine cabinets for forgotten pills. Some buy from kids. For others, drugs are a click away on the Internet.

"Kids think, 'It's not heroin. It's not crack. It's a legal drug. How bad can that be?' " says Barbara Zohlman, executive director of Miami-Dade's DFYIT (Drug Free Youth In Town), a school-based drug-prevention program.

In our quick-fix world, kids see adults, who'd never touch an illegal drug, fill prescriptions to treat everything from physical pain to anxiety. Meanwhile, pharmaceutical companies via TV and magazines hype drugs that promise a happier, thinner, more energetic you, all by popping a pill.

Between 1992 and 2002, while the U.S. population grew 13 percent, the number of prescriptions filled for controlled drugs - those with an abuse risk, such as morphine - increased by 154 percent, according to the study.

"We're a society of pill takers," Zohlman says. "We look at something to make us feel better rather than looking inside to make ourselves feel better."

Shannon slumps in a chair at the Starting Place, a treatment facility in Hollywood, Fla., where he's spending three months trying to shake his habit. Beside him sits Kyle Kahler, a fast-talking, energetic 16-year-old who squirms in his chair.

School dropouts at 14, they're both pharming party veterans. And addicts.

Kids like Shannon and Kyle can easily get addicted to painkillers, such as OxyContin or anti-anxiety medicines such as Xanax. But even if their drug use doesn't land them in treatment, it can put them in the hospital.

When properly prescribed and taken as directed, opioids such as OxyContin safely relieve pain. Depressants, including Xanax, ease anxiety. And stimulants such as Ritalin increase attention and energy.

But taking such powerful drugs without supervision or mixing them with others, including alcohol, is a recipe for disaster. They can make breathing difficult or cause a rapid drop or increase in heart rate. They can impair senses so that everyday activities, such as driving a car, are hazardous.

In addition, kids up the danger factor by taking pills in unsafe ways. OxyContin, for

instance, is supposed to be released into the bloodstream over several hours for long-term pain relief. But kids crush the pills for a quicker, and potentially more harmful, rush.

About 75 percent of prescription drug abusers also take other drugs or drink, according to the Columbia University report. Shannon and Kyle are no exception, routinely mixing legal pharmaceuticals with illegal drugs.

"You feel like you're on some kind of truth serum," says Kyle, who started smoking marijuana at 10 before moving on to prescription drugs as a teenager. "You have no inhibitions or fears. You feel like you can fight the biggest guy."

Getting the drugs is no problem. The boys buy from friends - OxyContin \$12 to \$15 pill or Xanax for \$3. Valium goes for \$4 to \$5 a pop.

Sometimes kids trade with each other - a couple of Valium for a more powerful OxyContin.

At school or on the street, word of a pharming party drifts like smoke. Maybe they'll meet at someone's house when the parents are gone or rent a hotel room or find an abandoned warehouse.

Shannon was glad to be in the loop. When he got wind of a party, he wanted to be there.

"You're so much happier when you're f----- up," he says. "It's all good."

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#### BY THE NUMBERS

Compared with the rest of their peers, teens who abuse prescription drugs are ...

-Twice as likely to use alcohol

-5 times likelier to use marijuana

-12 times likelier to use heroin

-15 times likelier to use Ecstasy

-21 times likelier to use cocaine

Source: National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University