Prescription Drug Abuse – A National Epidemic

Overdoses from prescription painkillers kill more Americans than those from heroin and cocaine – combined. That's a pretty startling statistic. But a new report from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says just that.

On November 1, the CDC reported that overdose deaths from prescription painkillers have "skyrocketed" since 1999, when 4,000 people were killed by painkillers like hydrocodone, oxycodone and methadone. In 2008, that number jumped more than three times – to nearly 15,000. That's more than 40 people every day!

The CDC is calling prescription painkiller overdoses a "public health epidemic." In fact, almost half a million emergency room visits in 2009 were related to painkiller misuse or abuse.

The experts at America's 57 poison centers receive thousands of calls each year about exposures to medicines, including painkillers. In fact, in 2009, poison centers fielded more than 12,000 calls about exposures to acetaminophen with hydrocodone. And that's just one example!

What can I do to prevent prescription drug abuse?

- Don't ever share medicine with someone else. A medicine is prescribed for you and only you.
- Read the label and follow your doctor's or pharmacists' instructions.
- Always lock up your medicine, including painkillers. That way, young children will not get into the medicine and it will be harder for teens or others to take something they should not.
- Keep track of how many pills are in each bottle so you will know if some are missing.
- Discard all unused medicines as soon as you finish taking them. Call your poison center at 1-800-222-1222 about how to dispose of medicine safely.
- Participate in local medication disposal events. It is the safest way to remove prescription drugs from homes and protect the environment at the same time. Check the DEA website for a national prescription take back event in your community: http://www.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/drug_disposal/takeback/index.html

The Texas Poison Center Network serves the State of Texas to prevent poisoning. TPCN offers free and confidential services 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If you believe you have been exposed to a poison or have questions about a substance that may be poisonous, call **1-800-222-1222** immediately.