

A Weekly FAX from the Center for Substance Abuse Research

University of Maryland, College Park

Texas Study Warns of Codeine Cough Syrup Abuse

Leaning on Syrup, a report by the Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse, presents the findings of interviews with Texas law enforcement officials, drug treatment providers, and 25 adults in Houston who reported abusing codeine cough syrup. According to the report, Texas health officials “should be aware of this latest drug problem and should warn public health workers involved with both adults and children” (p. 22). Following are some of the findings of the report.

How is cough syrup obtained? Codeine cough syrup is available by prescription from physicians or through the illegal drug market (often at “syrup houses”).

How is cough syrup abused? It can be drunk undiluted or mixed with alcohol or soft drinks to improve the taste. It is also used in combination with other drugs, such as marijuana or heroin. Some people interviewed reported coating marijuana joints or blunts with codeine cough syrup.

Who abuses cough syrup? “People from different sociodemographic groups are involved in the procurement, misuse, and underground economy of syrup” (p. 22).

What are the effects of abusing cough syrup? Cough suppressant syrups usually consist of three ingredients that can have psychoactive side effects: codeine, dextromethorphan (DXM), and diphenhydramine (i.e., Benedryl). Codeine and diphenhydramine have sedative effects while DXM use results in euphoria, relaxation, and altered perceptions (for more information on DXM, see the March 1999 *DEWS ALERT*). Other effects reported by users include fatigue, a loss of coordination, constipation, and urinary retention.

Why is cough syrup abused? Reasons cited by users for abusing codeine cough syrup include that it is free, legal, and perceived as safer than illegal drugs. Syrup is often used “to ameliorate the effects of a drug binge” or “as an aid in self-treatment for drug abuse” (p. 16).

What are street names for cough syrup? In Houston, codeine cough syrup is also known as lean (referring to the effect of users losing their coordination), nods (referring to the sedative effect), AC/DC, barr, down, and Karo.

SOURCE: Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse (TCADA), “Leaning on syrup: Procurement and misuse of codeine cough syrup in Houston,” October 1999. For more information, contact TCADA at 512-349-6600. A copy of the report is also available online at www.tcada.state.tx.us/research/lean.html.

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