

DA, Sheriff Warn of Increasing Illegal Abuse of OxyContin in San Diego County

This article was written by the San Diego County Sheriff's Department to educate law enforcement officials and parents about the emerging OxyContin epidemic in Southern California and the symptoms of individuals, specifically teenagers and young adults, abusing OxyContin.

Background

In May 2008, detectives from the South East Narcotics Team (SENT) began to see a rise in the abuse of Oxycodone as arrests for possession and sale of OxyContin in Poway and Santee increased significantly. SENT Detectives responsible for conducting follow-up investigations related to these arrests immediately recognized that OxyContin was becoming an increasing trend among teenagers and young adults. In July 2008, SENT detectives began coordinating investigative efforts with agents from the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and Integrated Narcotics Task Force (NTF). Since then, detectives and agents have arrested over 20 individuals on charges ranging from simple possession of OxyContin, possession for sale of OxyContin, and possession of heroin. The majority of these arrests were in the Poway, Santee and Ramona areas of San Diego County. In September of this year, the District Attorney's Office put together a task force with components from the DEA, NTF, Bureau of Narcotic Enforcement and local law enforcement agencies. The task force is currently gathering intelligence and working on long term solutions to address this problem.

Legitimate Uses for Oxycodone

Oxycodone is an opiate that is prescribed for moderate to high pain relief associated with severe injuries, bursitis, dislocation, fractures, neuralgia, arthritis, lower back and cancer pain. It is also for postoperative pain and for pain relief following childbirth. As with most opioids, Oxycodone is highly addictive and has a high potential for abuse, thus it is classified as a schedule II Narcotic. Most individuals who abuse Oxycodone seek to gain euphoric effects, mitigate pain, and avoid withdrawal symptoms associated with Oxycodone or heroin abstinence.

OxyContin, Percocet, Percodan, and Tylox are other trade names for Oxycodone products. OxyContin is prescribed in pill form and is supposed to be taken orally to allow the controlled release of Oxycodone over a 12 hour period, making it the longest lasting pain reliever on the market. While the dose prescribed by physicians vary for each patient, the typical OxyContin dose ranges from 10mg to 80mg and is taken two to four times per day.



Patients using shorter acting Oxycodone products, such as Percocet, may need to take the product every four to six hours to obtain the desired effects. Slang terms for these drugs include: Vicodin -Norcos or Watsons; Xanax - Z-Bars, bars, or Zannies; Percocet – Perks; OxyContin - OC, Ox, 80's, or Beans.

Most abusers interviewed by SENT detectives said they have tried Vicodin and/or Xanax, which “just makes them chill” or “relaxes them.” Abusers say the pills help them escape the pressures of school, nagging parents, nagging teachers, household chores, etc. Abusers believe by “popping” four or five Vicodin or chewing one or two Vicodin, all of their problems are solved for a few hours. One OxyContin abuser told Detectives that **“as a kid you start chewing a few Vicodin and the next thing you know you’re taking heroin.”**

Trends

While conducting OxyContin investigations in these areas, detectives found one common theme: “Lots of people, are selling lots of Oxy, to lots of kids.” Teenagers and young adults between the ages of 17 and 25 are buying OxyContin where ever they can get it and paying between \$50 and \$80 per pill. During interviews with numerous young adults, detectives quickly become educated with the increasing dangers of OxyContin abuse.

The Story of “Jay” and How OxyContin is Abused

To show the impact of OxyContin abuse by teenagers and young adults in San Diego County, I will profile one such individual. **But make no mistake about it, this one kid represents the story of thousands of others around our county, and for the first time in my 19 years as a cop I’m scared for my kids and yours!**

“Jay” whose name has been changed to hide his true identity, is 18 years old and is facing a possible prison term for seven residential burglaries; the seven he admitted to in court! Off the record, “Jay” admitted to quite a few more residential burglaries and an unlimited amount of vehicle burglaries. “Jay” comes from a middle to upper class family and has a younger sister. “Jay’s” parents divorced when he was about 16 years old; however, both parents are still active in “Jay’s” life and get along well with each other. Coincidentally, like a lot of these cases, one of “Jay’s” parents is a member of the San Diego law enforcement community.

When “Jay” was about 16 years old he began experimenting with marijuana, which he continued to use off and on until his arrest in late 2008. Like most schools in San Diego County, marijuana and other drugs were very prevalent at “Jay’s” school. It wasn’t long before “Jay” started using cocaine, which he only used for about a month because he didn’t really care for it. “Jay” also began experimenting with mushrooms, ecstasy and LSD, but he still wasn’t getting the desired high. To this day, “Jay” is not really sure what effect he wanted. Soon enough, “Jay” was introduced to prescription medications, such as Vicodin, Xanax, and Percocet, which are commonly found in medicine cabinets. When “Jay” was 17 years old, he was introduced to OxyContin. “Jay” was taught to grind up one 80mg pill and snort a quarter of it. When describing the effects “Jay” said, “This was what I was looking for.” For some users, OxyContin relaxes the user to a vegetative type state. Soon after he first started using OxyContin, “Jay” began snorting an entire pill at a time.



Within a month “Jay” began smoking pills, which is the most common method of use among OxyContin abusers. “Jay” started smoking a quarter of a pill. After removing the coating, the pill is placed on a strip of aluminum foil. A lighter is used to heat the bottom of the foil and when the pill begins to melt, it slides down the foil leaving a black trail or “skid” mark. Fumes are created and inhaled. Users slide the pill back and forth inhaling the fumes until it’s gone. Users claim when smoking the OxyContin or “Oxy,” “It hits you much quicker,” but the effects still only last three to four hours.

Within a short period of time “Jay” developed a high tolerance and was using 15 to 20 pills a week. “Jay” became very addicted and in his own words said, **“I can’t believe it, after one time I was hooked.”** To support his habit \$750 a week habit, “Jay” began stealing from his parents and then others. Even though Jay knew he might get caught he couldn’t stop, you see; Jay didn’t just want to get high, he needed to! Like heroin users, “Jay” could only go two days without using “Oxy” before he began to get withdrawal symptoms and get sick. His symptoms worsened until he ingested more “Oxy.”

Some OxyContin abusers have admitted they can only go twelve hours before getting sick. Until they can get the “Oxy,” users will often resort to Vicodin or Xanax which cost about \$2 to \$5 on the street. Users also try Suboxine or “Subs,” an anti-drug to curb their appetite for OxyContin.

Smoking or snorting the OxyContin causes the drug to enter the body extremely fast. Within ten minutes, the effects are felt and last three to four hours. Since the pill is not being taken in the prescribed manner, the Oxycodone isn’t being introduced into the body slowly it’s introduced all at once. For many the story stops here, and most of the people we talk with will continue to smoke it until they get legitimate help such as long-term rehabilitation.

For “Jay,” and increasingly more abusers whom we are talking with, a higher tolerance is developed and smoking OxyContin pills isn’t enough to get the desired high. After several months of smoking OxyContin, “Jay” began injecting a quarter pill. Jay described injecting OxyContin as “the best yet.” “Jay” continued injecting Oxy until his arrest in September 2008. “Jay” also started using heroin since it was cheaper than OxyContin and has similar effects. However, “Jay” preferred OxyContin and switched back.

Paraphernalia

Most OxyContin abusers are often found in possession of foil in their bedrooms, cars and even purses. They will often save the used foil with the “skid” marks (burnt OxyContin residue) on them so they can “re hit” or smoke off the residue if they are unable to purchase additional OxyContin. It’s also common for OxyContin abusers to have multiple lighters in their possession which they use to burn the “Oxy.”

Some other common paraphernalia found on OxyContin abusers includes hose clamps which act as a grader used to crush the pill into a fine powder, or a dollar bill, with the pill folded inside and then crushed with a hard instrument like a cigarette lighter. It is common for OxyContin abusers to remove the green coating prior to ingestion. Abusers will put the pill in their mouth to wet it and then wipe the green coating off with the inside of their shirt or socks. This will leave green marks on their clothing until washed.

Slang terms for prescription drugs (mentioned above) are often used in text messages.

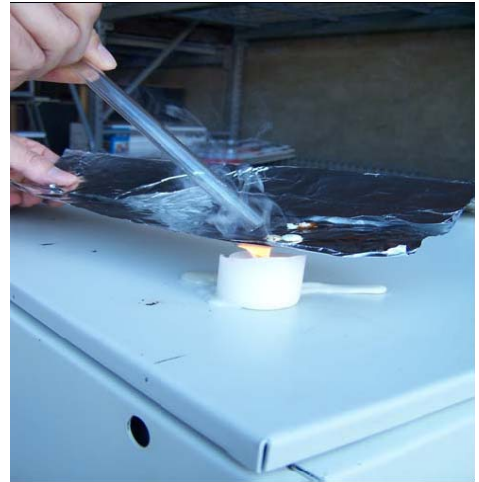
Transition from OxyContin Abuse to Heroin Abuse

Many OxyContin abusers will try heroin at some point. Once the abuser gets over the fear of using needles, heroin becomes the cheaper, more preferred drug. Since heroin costs approximately \$50 per gram, is much cheaper than OxyContin. Once abusers try heroin some will continue to use it and others will switch back to OxyContin. Until recently, the abuse of heroin in Poway, Santee and Ramona was low and abuse of heroin by Caucasians was uncommon.

Training Bulletin

On December 22, 2008, as a result of local efforts, the El Paso Intelligence Center published a training bulletin titled The Dangers Associated with Smoking OxyContin® and Indicators of Its Use. A segment of this article discussed recent testing on smoking OxyContin.

The photograph on the right depicts the process of "chasing the dragon." A chemist at the DEA Southwest Lab wiped off the outer green coating of the OC80 (Purdue Pharma) tablet or 80mg Oxycodone and placed it on a piece of aluminum foil, and heated it using a candle. The vapors that were emitted would have been inhaled using a tube or some sort of pipe. In the lab, it showed that Oxycodone vapors would survive this heating process and were in fact analyzed using mass spectrometry. The other components in the tablet, the sugars and time release materials, also vaporize and would be inhaled as well.



The picture below (bottom left) shows the streak or "skid" that would result in the process of melting the tablets. The other picture (bottom right) shows the "skid" marks, which were confirmed to contain Oxycodone residue.



FAQ'S

Q.) Where do OxyContin users get the drug?

OxyContin is only manufactured in the U.S. and Canada. However, investigators are seeing teenagers and young adults going into Mexico, purchasing OxyContin and bringing it back across the border. Also dirty doctors, use of false prescriptions (scripts), or doctor shopping all play a significant part.

Q.) What are the signs and symptoms of someone under the influence of OxyContin?

Like heroin, OxyContin is an opiate and will give abusers a high similar to high grade heroin, but with worse consequences. The initial rush is usually accompanied by a warm flushing of the skin, dry mouth, and a heavy feeling in the extremities, abusers usually will be drowsy for several hours, and experience a sense of euphoria and relaxation. Mental function is clouded by the effect on the central nervous system, cardiac and respiratory functions slow, and speech may be slurred. These symptoms may be accompanied with nausea, vomiting, and severe itching.

Q.) What are the symptoms of OxyContin withdrawal?

OxyContin withdrawal is similar to heroin withdrawal in that it is almost impossible to go through alone. Withdrawal symptoms of OxyContin are worse than heroin and last longer. Professional help from a drug rehabilitation center is the best and safest way to do this. Unfortunately, there is no known "painless" method for OxyContin withdrawal.

OxyContin withdrawal symptoms include but are not limited to:

- perpetually being tired
- hot/cold sweats
- heart palpitations
- joints and muscles in constant pain
- vomiting
- nausea
- uncontrollable coughing
- diarrhea
- insomnia
- watery eyes
- excessive yawning
- depression

Q.) What should I look for if I suspect my child is using OxyContin?

First and foremost, a change in behavior is common. Abusers will often lose interest in things that used to be very important to them. This may include school, sports, church, and maybe something as simple as family dinners. Physical indicators may include weight loss, poor complexion or hygiene and lack of energy. At some point money will become an issue.

Typically, abusers will begin stealing money or household items in order to pawn or trade them for money. We've seen kids pull money from their parents by telling them they need tires for their car, money for a school event, etc. Text messaging is also very common, and for one reason or another, these kids save their messages. Look for slang terms such as Norcos, Watsons, Beans, 80's, Bars, Z-Bars, etc. Or maybe something as simple as, "You got any of those? I need one." As for paraphernalia, rolls of aluminum foil is a big one, also lighters, straws, rolled up dollar bills, syringes, and spoons that are burnt on one side.

For questions or comments regarding this article, please contact Detective Dave Ross, San Diego Sheriff's Departments South East Narcotics Team (619) 401-8123.