

*On **The Saturday Early Show** on Jan. 12, 2008, medical contributor **Dr. Mallika Marshall** added perspective and insight to this story:*

What are these young people after?

Some ingredients in over-the-counter cough and cold remedies, if taken in excess, can cause hallucinations and out-of-body-like experiences, similar to the effects caused by certain illegal drugs, such as PCP. Now, you would think these would be unpleasant side effects for most people, but for young people, it can produce a "high."

What's in these medications that produces the high?

It's primarily the dextromethorphan that's present in more than 140 over-the-counter cold remedies. Dextromethorphan is a cough suppressant and is generally safe when taken as directed, but in excess, it can cause serious health problems.

How risky is it?

Pretty risky. Overdose can cause vomiting, severe abdominal pain, uncontrolled violent muscle spasms, an irregular heartbeat, delirium, and even death.

Which over-the-counter products are we talking about here?

Products that are found in almost any American home: About 30 percent of the people surveyed chose Nyquil. Nearly 20 percent chose Coricidin, and nearly 20 percent chose Robitussin. But another 40 percent misused a wide variety of other OTC products. And there are many other products, brand-name and generic, that contain dextromethorphan, including lozenges, gel caps, oral strips, etc.

These kinds of products can be found in nearly any home's medicine cabinet. And that raises the big problem for parents: Since many, if not most, teens have access to these medications, how can you tell if your teen is misusing them?

You should suspect any kind of drug use in a child whose behavior has suddenly changed. Are they complaining of being tired all the time? Do they have a lot of health complaints like belly pain? Is there a sudden lack of physical coordination? Are they showing less interest in school or are their grades falling? Do they hang out with new friends or show less interest in the family? And, in terms of dextromethorphan, do you notice cold remedies disappearing from the medicine cabinet or have you found empty containers in their room?

What should parents do or say if they suspect their teens are misusing such drugs?

You obviously need to have an open conversation with them about the dangers of over-the-counter drugs, as well as illegal substances. Be serious, but supportive -- and keep your anger in check. If it's a serious problem, you may need to seek professional counseling.

This study focused on people between the ages of 12-and-25, but what about younger kids? Are these cough and cold remedies safe for them?

Not for the youngest children. The FDA recently held a series of high-profile hearings looking at whether cold and cough **medicines** are safe and effective for widespread use. And last fall, an FDA advisory committee concluded that these medications shouldn't be given to any child under the age of 6.