



Pain Medications: Benefits and Risks

Opioids are powerful drugs related to chemicals derived from the poppy plant that have been used for centuries to relieve pain. Some examples of opioids are heroin, morphine, opium and codeine. Even though they were discovered centuries ago, opioids are still among the most effective pain relievers available to physicians for treating pain.

This instructional outline aims to engage students to think critically about the use of opioid pain medications, as well as the benefits and risks associated with them.

Instructional strategies

1. Watch the following two segments of the Degrassi episode "[Can't tell me nothing](#)" (from the beginning to 1:15 and then from 11:28 to 12:41). In the first segment, Kate is caught messing with her mother's codeine pills by her sister. She says she started taking them to cope with the pain resulting from a knee injury she incurred while playing soccer. In the second segment, Kate is again confronted by her sister, who is concerned about her taking codeine pills and pushing herself to play soccer even though her knee is injured.

Facilitate a class discussion about the potential benefits and risks of opioid pain medications with questions such as those below:

- a. In the segments you watched, Kate stole pain pills from her mom to cope with the pain resulting from a knee injury. What are your thoughts about her decision? How risky do you think it is to do what she did?
 - b. Why do you think she is hiding what she is doing? What is she afraid of?
 - c. Kate mentions that a doctor refused to prescribe her opioid pain pills for her knee. What does this suggest to you?
 - d. Why does Kate choose to use the drugs? Do you think her reason is a good one? Try to come up with some examples of reasons that don't make sense for using drugs as well as examples of good reasons to use drugs. How do you know the difference?
 - e. If you had been in her situation, what would you have done? Explain your answer.
 - f. What are some factors that would make this situation safer? What about factors that would make the situation riskier? Explain.
 - g. How come we so often think of taking drugs as the first (and often only) solution for pain relief? What are other ways to deal with pain?
 - h. What about physical vs. emotional pain? Can we cope with these different types of pains in the same ways? Discuss.
2. Ask students to work in small groups to discuss the following scenario and develop answers to the questions below and then discuss them as a class.

One of your friends, whose parents split up last year, confides in you that she first started taking pain pills after knee surgery, but now is continuing to take them and having to get them illegally. She says they help her deal with the emotional pain in her family.

- a. How would you help your friend in this situation?

- b. What are some of the risks here? How can the situation be made safer? What might make the situation even riskier?
 - c. Can drugs help us get through tough times in our lives? How so? What are some of the risks in using drugs to deal with difficult times?
 - d. What are some other ways to cope with difficult times in our lives? Come up with as many different strategies as you can.
 - e. Why do you think some people choose drugs to cope with difficult times? What is appealing about drugs? What may prevent people from seeking alternatives?
3. Invite students to think critically about how we perceive drugs in our culture and how that may impact the way we perceive the risks associated with different drugs. You can use questions such as those below.
 - a. Drug experts suggest that all drug use involves some risk. Do you think some drugs are more risky than other drugs? Explain.
 - b. What factors make drug use more or less risky? What factors relate to the drug? What factors relate to other things (like the person taking the drug or the context in which the drug is taken)?
 - c. Fentanyl can be used relatively safely when prescribed by a doctor. Then why are so many people overdosing on fentanyl?

If desired, you could have students read some background material such as [Understanding Substance Use](#) before exploring these questions.

Drug literacy

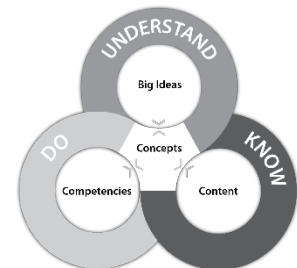
Big idea

- Drugs can be tremendously helpful and also very harmful
- As humans, both individually and as communities, we need to learn how to manage the drugs in our lives

Competencies

- Assess the complex ways in which drugs impact the health and wellbeing of individuals, communities and societies
- Recognize binary constructs (e.g., good vs bad) and assess their limitation in addressing complex social issues like drug use
- Develop social and communication skills in addressing discourse and behaviour related to drugs

For a complete look at the drug literacy competencies, as defined by the Centre for Addictions Research of BC, see: www.uvic.ca/research/centres/cisur/assets/docs/iminds/hs-pp-drug-curriculum.pdf





Links to Curriculum

First Peoples' principles of learning

- Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place)
- Learning involves recognizing the consequences of one's actions

English Language Arts 9

Big ideas

- Exploring stories narrative texts helps us understand ourselves and make connections to others and to the world
- Questioning what we hear, read and view contributes to our ability to be educated and engaged citizens.

Competencies

- Exchange ideas and viewpoints to build shared understanding and extend thinking
- Transform ideas and information to create original texts
- Express an opinion and support it with credible evidence

Physical and Health Education 9

Big idea

- Healthy choices influence our physical, emotional and mental well-being

Competency

- Assess and evaluate strategies for managing problems related to mental well-being and substance use