Painkiller abuse

Dear Alice,

A couple of questions for you: what are the long-term side effects of one abusing prescription painkillers, such as Vicodin? What advice can you give to someone who has gotten off of them to help them stay off???

Thanks!

Answer

Dear Reader,

Vicodin (generic name hydrocodone) is a prescription painkiller that may also provide an euphoric high in many of the people who take it. This opiate-derived drug works by blocking pain signals in the brain that come from the nerves of the spinal cord. This action also happens to promote a sense of happiness and well being, leading to the addictive euphoria. Although these sensations may be sweet in the short term, side effects of long-term use can cause psychological dependence and physical damage, including hallucinations, severe confusion, constipation, dizziness, lightheadedness and even death. If Vicodin is used for longer than it is prescribed, it may lead to withdrawal symptoms when the person stops using it. Withdrawal symptoms, such as restlessness, muscle or bone pain, or insomnia, range from moderate to severe, and discontinued use of Vicodin or other similar drugs should be done under the supervision of a medical professional.

Medical treatment of withdrawal symptoms is just one step in stopping the Vicodin addiction or abuse. This is done by giving the person methadone or LAAM (levo-alpha-acetyl-methadol) to help cope with the symptoms. Behavioral counseling or cognitive therapy may also be encouraged to teach the person how to live successfully without the drug. Methadone and LAAM are prescription drugs and their use must be under the guidance of a health care professional (who can decide how and where to proceed as treatment progresses). Additionally, because painkiller addiction is such a common problem, a large network of support groups exists to people become and remain drug free. Narcotics Anonymous has many established branches in several states, or check the website for the Drug and Alcohol Resource Center, which can help you locate a rehabilitation center in your area. Finally, check out the related questions for more information and tips on how to deal with this situation.

Alice!

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