

DEA turns to texting to fight prescription drug abuse

By Jen Christensen, CNN

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The DEA has launched a texting tip line to encourage pharmacists to anonymously report abuse.

A pharmacy tech who makes \$12 an hour but drives a Mercedes. A rumor that a pharmacist may be trading sex for drugs. A prescription note with handwriting that's a little too easy to read.

The Drug Enforcement Administration in Atlanta says all of these scenarios should leave pharmacy workers suspicious of illegal activity at their store. And they hope pharmacy employees -- or anyone, for that matter -- will report such activity to its new prescription drug abuse tip line.

The agency launched an initiative, TIP411, this week to allow the public to quickly and anonymously report suspicious activity. Tipsters can text TIP411, or 847-411, and then use the keyword PILLTIP. The message will be forwarded to a DEA agent who will investigate.

Georgia is one of the first states in the country to try the texting effort. The city of Philadelphia is also experimenting with the program. Agents hope it will become a successful weapon to fight the war on prescription drug abuse, a war they feel they are losing.

"It really is out of control here," said Rick Allen, director of the Georgia Drug and Narcotics Agency.

Prescription drug abuse is a national epidemic, according to the [Centers for Disease Control](#). Overdose rates in the United States have more than tripled since 1990, and prescription drugs are to blame for a number of those deaths.

The rise in overdoses parallels a 300% increase in the sale of strong opioid painkillers since 1999. In [2008](#), prescription pain pills actually killed more people than all those who died from taking cocaine or heroin.

The pain pills, unlike cocaine or heroin, are often bought legally -- at least at first. Very few come from someone robbing a pharmacy.

Most abusers get the pills from a friend or family member who had the initial prescription. Only 2.3% say they bought them from a drug dealer or stranger, according to the [National Survey on Drug Use and Health](#), which used 2010 data.

"The illegal prescription drug market and relative ease of which pharmaceutical substances can be obtained has resulted in a sharp increase in prescription drug abuse," said Harry Sommers, special agent in charge of the DEA's Atlanta division.

The issue can become an even bigger problem when the friend or family member runs out of the pills, according to Sommers. Then, often, people will either forge prescriptions from doctors or -- if they can't get access to legal drugs -- turn to another opioid like heroin, which is sometimes even easier to get.

With the announcement of the tip line, the DEA said it is sending education materials to 1,200 pharmacies in the Atlanta metropolitan area. The packet includes tip line information and a guide that points out suspicious signs to monitor.

The guide, a pamphlet, suggests that people get these drugs illegally by stealing doctors' prescription pads or altering a legitimate prescription with a different callback number that can ring to an accomplice that would verify the prescription. Other tricks include people calling the pharmacy masquerading as doctors.

The pamphlet warns pharmacists to watch for customers who come back a little too regularly or people who come in with a prescription for a stimulant and a depressant at the same time. Often, abusers will seek both "uppers" and "downers" when they are addicted to prescription painkillers.

A prescription with all the words spelled out or with perfect handwriting is also suspicious, according to the DEA. Most doctors are in such a hurry, they will use abbreviations, and doctors are not typically known for neat handwriting.

The [CDC](#) suggests that pharmacists talk with patients about safely using, storing and disposing of prescription painkillers. It also recommends that health professionals consult their state's [prescription drug monitoring programs](#).

Sommers said he doesn't think his agency will get a ton of tips through the new tip line, but he believes the tips it does get will yield good results.