

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ON CODEINE-CONTAINING COUGH SYRUPS (CCS)

What is Codeine?

Codeine is extracted from the opium poppy plant. It is an opioid analgesic (pain-reliever) and also used for the treatment of cough. Codeine has limited analgesic effect when compared to other opioids like morphine. Codeine has the effect of creating a euphoric or calming state when used for a long time.

What is Codeine used for?

Codeine is used as;

- Analgesic (pain reliever)
- Anti-diarrheal agent
- Relief of a non-productive cough

How does codeine work as a cough suppressant?

Codeine works to relieve non-productive cough primarily via its action at central receptors in the brain.

When does a codeine-containing cough syrup become harmful?

The medicinal benefits of a codeine- containing cough syrup can quickly become harmful when it's not taken as prescribed. Excess amounts, -regular use or overuse can cause codeine side effects, many of which can be dangerous and may affect the brain in ways very similar to illegal drugs.

What are the Side Effects of Regular Use of Codeine-containing products?

Codeine is an opiate, the same as is morphine and heroin, and the regular use of this drug will cause physical, emotional or mental addiction.

Regular use of codeine- containing cough syrups are as dangerous as regular use of morphine, heroin or any other opiate drug, with the only difference being that it might take a longer period of continual use to become addicted. But once addicted, the withdrawals and the road back to where one was before they started using codeine-containing cough syrup is arduous and painful and to have successful outcomes, it usually requires professional rehabilitation.

What are the dangers of mixing codeine- containing cough syrups with other substances?

It is very dangerous to mix codeine- containing cough syrups with other drugs like promethazine. Mostly, people who die from codeine-containing cough syrup overdose mix it with multiple drugs and sometimes with alcohol. Like codeine, alcohol is also a depressant and taking them at the same time can result in:

- Dangerous respiratory depression
- Brain damage
- Coma
- Death

Is codeine-containing cough syrup safe to be used in children?

NO. Codeine-containing cough syrups are not safe to be used in children. Children are known to rapidly metabolize codeine into an overdose of morphine and therefore experience severely slowed breathing rates, and may even stop breathing and die.

What are the side effects associated with the use of codeine-containing cough syrups?

The major side effects of codeine use are bloating, blurred vision, chills, cold clammy skin, confusion, constipation, darkened urine, difficult or troubled breathing, dizziness, faintness or lightheadedness when getting up suddenly from a lying or sitting position, irregular pounding or racing heartbeat, weak pulse, feeling of warmth, fever, indigestion, loss of appetite, nausea, no blood pressure or pulse, no breathing, pains in the stomach, side, or abdomen, possibly radiating to the back, pale or blue lips, fingernails or skin, redness of the face, neck, arms, and occasionally the upper chest, shortness of breath, stopping of the heart, sweating, unconsciousness, unusual tiredness or weakness, vomiting, wheezing, yellow eyes or skin.

What are the signs of overdose with codeine-containing cough syrups?

Signs of overdose with codeine-containing cough syrups are bluish lips or skin, change in consciousness, chest pain or discomfort, constricted pupils (black part of the eye), decreased awareness or responsiveness, extreme sleepiness or unusual drowsiness, loss of consciousness, no blood pressure or pulse, severe sleepiness and slow or irregular heartbeat. When these signs are witnessed, the victim should be rushed to the emergency room.

How can you detect codeine-containing products misuse and dependence?

Clients repeated requests for certain codeine containing products by name, their refusal to consider other products. Such clients usually approach pharmacy staff with well-rehearsed scripts and resort to visiting one facility to another, termed “pharmacy hopping”, when they are denied sale of their desired product.

What are the signs of withdrawal symptoms from codeine-containing cough syrup?

Early symptoms of withdrawal may include feeling irritable or anxious, trouble sleeping, teary eyes, runny nose, sweating, yawning, muscle aches, and fast heartbeat.

How can Pharmacists help reduce the risk of misuse of codeine-containing cough syrup?

Pharmacists can help by removing codeine-containing cough syrup displayed at point of sale, refusing or restricting the sale except by prescription and also by providing information and making direct interventions through questioning.

What is the FDA doing to control the supply of codeine-containing cough syrup?

Codeine-containing cough syrups are regulated as controlled substances. Going forward the FDA will:

1. Strengthen public awareness campaign on the dangers of misuse of codeine-containing cough syrups.
2. Strengthen the follow-up inspections to monitor the distribution records of importers and manufacturers of codeine-containing cough syrups.
3. Label change to include the following:
 - Do not use unless on medical advice
 - Controlled Prescription Only Medicine, Not to be sold without a valid prescription.
4. Collaborate with the Pharmacy Council to undertake the following
 - restrictions on the display of codeine-containing cough syrups on the shelves in the Community Pharmacies (to be distributed as Controlled drug, under lock and key)
 - strictly enforce distribution of codeine-containing cough syrups a controlled drug (to require Pharmacies keep a record of prescriptions dispensed with a copy of the valid prescription)

How can pharmacists raise public awareness of misuse of codeine-containing cough syrup?

Pharmacists can help by providing the right information on the codeine-containing cough syrup in order to enable clients make informed decisions and also demand valid prescriptions before dispensing of these products.

For further clarification contact FDA on

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