

# Addicted to cough medicine?

## Key ingredient in over-the-counter cough remedies proves addictive, even deadly to some who abuse it

- [Over-the-counter abuse](#)

There are reports of a new threat, from a drug you've probably given your children to get some sleep. NBC's Edie Magnus reports.

By Edie Magnus

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Ever lose sleep worrying about your teen-ager and drugs? There are reports of a new threat, from a drug you've probably given your children to get some sleep: cough and cold medicine. It's right there in your medicine cabinet, generally safe if used as directed. But in large amounts it can become a dangerous, even deadly mind-altering drug.

*Jonathan: "Okay, Joe it's been an hour and a half since you started. Are you hallucinating?"*

*Joe: "I think I can if I close my eyes but I want to take all my pills before I start doing that."*

Those are the voices of two college buddies at the start of a psychedelic drug trip. It is December, 2002, their voices frozen in time, preserved on tape.

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*Jonathan: "What are you seeing?"*

*Joe: "I closed my eyes and I saw this hall with these arches and in these arches were like giant eyeballs."*

What's remarkable about this experience, the first of many for these young men, is that neither of them, as far as anyone knows, had ever dabbled with drugs before. In fact, one of them, Jonathan Frary from Peoria, Illinois, was the very picture of a small town, all-American boy.

Growing up, his parents say, Jonathan had two passions: an ambition to be a military pilot and an intense interest in the meaning of dreams. But after two years at the Air Force Academy in Colorado, they say, Jonathan soured on military life and decided to transfer closer to home and major in psychology at Illinois State University.

**Greg Frary:** “I can hardly say it without crying, but he was not only my son but he was my best friend.”

But he was a best friend who was keeping a terrible secret. Jonathan completely hid his drug trips from his dad. In September 2003, Jonathan was 22 and just two months shy of graduation. He came home one weekend to see his sister's newborn and before going back to school, asked his mom to get him some orange juice.

**Linda Frary:** “I felt pretty bad when I found out later what he was using the orange juice for, you know, but I had no idea.”

Three days later, with no word from Jonathan, Greg Frary drove to his son's apartment. A maintenance man let him in.

**Greg Frary:** “I walked into the bedroom and I saw Jon laying on the floor. He was just laying there, dead.”

**Edie Magnus:** “What else did you see?”

**Greg Frary:** “While I was sitting next to Jon's body, I was looking around his room. And that's when I saw the orange juice and this brown vial that I picked up. And it had a very long word wrapped around the vial.”

The word on the vial was dextromethorphan. To Greg Frary, the word meant little. But to his wife, Linda, it rang a bell.

**Linda Frary:** “I knew that it was a drug, that it was a cough suppressant in Robitussin cause I had heard that on TV.”

The coroner ruled that Jonathan Frary had died of an accidental overdose of dextromethorphan, or DXM, the first such death ever recorded in Illinois. The Frarys were crushed and mystified. Not only had their straight arrow son died of a overdose, but he'd overdosed on a cough suppressant, a simple drug store product that might be found in their own medicine cabinet.

**Greg Frary:** “Even as I was kneeling next to his body I said, John, why did you do this? This was stupid.”

The answer, it turned out, was right there in Jonathan's apartment. It was there that Greg Frary found hours of tape recordings, which revealed that the innocuous cough suppressant, taken in large doses, was acting as an hallucinogen.

In the early audiotapes, Jonathan and a friend are heard-taking extraordinarily high doses of Coricidin, a common over the counter cough and cold medicine which contains DXM.

**Greg Frary:** "The recordings I've listened to, that he and his friend made while tripping, sound like they had a lot of fun."

**Edie Magnus:** "So you understand why he liked it?"

**Greg Frary:** "Yes, I would have to admit that if I were younger, and it was available to me I might have used it. I'm ashamed to admit it but yes, knowing how much he was like me, you know, I can see that happening."

Jonathan Frary became yet another casualty of a disturbing new adolescent drug craze: Lots of kids, it turns out, are tripping, experiencing highs akin to LSD or PCP, on massive quantities of cough and cold medicines that are sold over the counter every day. more than 140 of them contain the ingredient dextromethorphan. There are no reliable numbers on DXM abuse, but Dateline found cases across the country of teenagers -- and even some adults -- winding up in drug treatment, in the hospital, and in the morgue. By some estimates there've been more than a dozen DXM related deaths.

At a special Minnesota school for recovering addicts called Sobriety High, teens say they chased the DXM high until they nearly died from overdoses or attempted suicide. They say they heard about it from friends, that it takes about a bottle of liquid or eight pills to get high.

**Edie Magnus:** "One bottle of Robitussin? You just drink it down? All that syrup?"

**Girl:** "I'd throw it up. I couldn't do the Robitussin."

**Boy:** "That's why most of us did pills."

Not only do cold tablets like Coricidin contain 30 milligrams of dextromethorphan, more than other cold medicines, these teens say it was also the easiest to steal and conceal.

**Nick:** "I'd grab a couple of boxes, open them up, and depending on if I felt like walking or not, I'd walk through the aisles and throw empty boxes into other containers and just put the sheets in my pocket. So that way, you know, if someone did catch me, they would have no proof that I stole it."

**Edie Magnus:** Did you think you wouldn't get hurt?

**Nick:** "You don't really think about it... Toward the end I was taking 60 to 80 pills a day and by then I wasn't able to speak."

**Edie Magnus:** "How come you didn't die, any of you?"

**Nick:** “You can grow tolerance really quick. You’ve got to push it up by a couple of pills a day.”

So when Nick, who was gobbling up to 80 pills a day, was hospitalized with an overdose, his parents were suddenly faced with losing him to a drug they'd never worried about in their wildest imaginings.

**Janna:** “I had gone through his room, and done, under the guise of cleaning it, had done a thorough search. But I was looking for, like, alcohol, marijuana, you know.”

**Eddie Magnus:** “The drugs you know.”

**Janna:** “Yeah. I wasn't looking for cold medicine.”

In the silence of cyberspace, there's a far flung community of devoted DXM abusers swapping recipes for cough syrup brownies and Coricidin cocktails, and dispensing advice on how to reach higher highs or plateaus. It was online that Jonathan Frary apparently found vendors who would sell him pure DXM powder, the powder in the brown vial that killed him.

Dr. Shannon Miller is a psychiatrist with the U.S. military, and one of the few addiction specialists who has researched the use of dextromethorphan among adults and teens. He says that DXM has a number of dangers, including dehydration, seizures, liver problems, and even cardiac arrest -- these from ingesting huge amounts of some of the other ingredients contained in those cough and cold medicines.

**Dr. Miller:** “It can be very dangerous.”

**Eddie Magnus:** “Isn't there a certain element of common sense about this? Like no kidding, if you take too much you're going to have an adverse outcome.”

**Dr. Miller:** “Sure, but something is happening in the machinery of the brain to cause you to want to exceed that dose over and over and over again.”

DXM's addiction potential is another risk Dr. Miller says is poorly understood. In experiments, it has been shown to hook animals every bit as much as PCP, but its addictive properties haven't been studied in humans.

**Dr. Miller:** “If the users aren’t aware that this is more than just a trip but there are medical risks that include addiction risks then we have a big problem.”

The National Institute for Drug Abuse is now sounding an alarm about DXM, listing it as an hallucinogen, along with LSD and PCP.

But another government agency, the Food and Drug Administration, says DXM is safe and effective when used properly -- and that no drug is safe above the recommended

dose. An agency spokesperson told Dateline there are no plans to require additional warnings about DXM on the products you buy over the counter, all of which puts the burden on parents and their kids to be aware of the risks of DXM abuse -- before they find out the hard way.

**Linda Frary:** “I guess the one thing I really want parents to know is that if it can happen to our son, it can happen to yours.”

Even though cough medications are sold over the counter, some pharmacies are now keeping them behind the counter, to keep kids from stealing them.