OVER-THE-COUNTER DRUGS

Sold on store shelves, risky in high doses.

Know the Basics

What it is

Using medicines sold without a prescription to get high, most often cough and cold medicines with dextromethorphan (DXM) or allergy medicines with diphenhydramine.

Legal isn't the same as safe

Large doses can cause hallucinations, a racing heart, seizures and loss of consciousness.

Hidden ingredients

Many cold medicines also contain acetaminophen, which can cause serious liver damage at high doses.

Social media challenges

Online "challenges" have encouraged teens to take large doses of allergy medicine. FDA has warned this can be deadly.

BY THE NUMBERS

96%

or more of Indiana students in every grade, 7th–12th, did **not** misuse over-the-counter drugs in the past month.

3.9% vs. 2.5%

of Indiana 8th graders misused over-the-counter drugs vs. used cannabis in the past month.

9th & 10th

grades saw significant increases in 2026 (to 4.0% and 3.6%), while most other substances fell.

2026 Indiana Youth Survey

Data Check: Using These Numbers Right

- **This one didn't follow the trend.** Over-the-counter misuse has held steady or risen while most substances dropped. That's worth watching, not panicking over: most students still don't misuse these drugs.
- **Wording matters.** The survey asks about using these medicines "to get high," not about normal use. Keep that distinction in your messages.
- **No product detail.** The survey doesn't say which medicines students misused, so don't name specific brands as the problem.

Laws & Safety in Indiana

- **Follow the label.** Taking more than directed, or mixing medicines, raises the risk of serious harm.
- **Store medicines safely** and keep track of what's in the cabinet.
- **Too much taken?** Call Poison Control at 1-800-222-1222. Call 911 for a seizure, trouble breathing or passing out.

Campaign Angles

- **Focus on middle school:** rates are highest in grades 7 through 10.
- **Bust the myth:** "you can buy it at the store" doesn't mean it's safe in large doses.
- **Reach parents** about safe storage, and never repeat challenge details.

Sources: 2026 Indiana Youth Survey, Prevention Insights, IU School of Public Health-Bloomington; U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA); National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA); America's Poison Centers.