



## March 2008 - Newsletter

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### Beware the Deadly Mix

*“Actor Heath Ledger’s death and a recent CDC report on fatal overdoses have brought national attention to the dangers of mixing prescription drugs.”* - Source: Los Angeles Times

This unsettling headline accompanied an analysis of the legally prescribed substances that in combination ended the life of the talented, 28-year-old **Brokeback Mountain** star. The New York City medical examiner eventually determined that six types of FDA approved painkillers and sedatives caused the death that was officially attributed to the “accidental abuse of prescription medication.”

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 14 million people per year misuse prescription drugs, including pain relievers, tranquilizers and stimulants. Of these, about 850,000 people regularly abuse popular sleep aids. Most assume these drugs are 100% safe because they are seen repeatedly on television. Thus, the urge to “up the dosage,” or combine with other drugs seems innocent. But Mark Boesen, a spokesperson for the American Pharmacists Association warns that “there isn’t any absolutely safe medication.” According to Boesen, “People get into difficulty if they’re taking a sleeping aid and they’re still tossing and turning. They may take another and another and can wind up in serious trouble.” Indeed, they may inadvertently forget what they’ve already taken as their focus and memory become fuzzy.

Ira Wilson, a professor of medicine at Tufts New England Medical Center, reminds us that this is by no means just an entertainment-industry problem. “People do a lot of things with their medicines that their doctors don’t know about, including stopping, starting, changing and combining them,” Wilson says. “Because many patients have more than one doctor, they are often getting multiple prescriptions. Patients must make sure that every health care professional they see knows all the medications they’re taking, including prescription, over-the-counter and alternative,” Wilson says.

In a perfect world, we would all have one physician and one pharmacist who would be on top of every prescription, herbal remedy and vitamin that we take. But often no one, except the patient, has the full drug picture. “My best advice is to try to use the same pharmacy or at least stay within the same corporation,” says Boesen of the APA. With regard to dosing, he adds: “People think it’s like the highway. If the signs say you should be going 55 mph, the engineers have anticipated that you might go faster than that. So they’ve engineered in some cushion. With drugs, the manufacturers don’t put any cushion in the maximum recommended dose.”

Your Employee Assistance Program is vitally concerned about your good health and well-being. If you have questions about your use of pharmaceuticals or find yourself drifting into dangerous usage patterns, we urge you to discuss your situation with your personal physician or pharmacist. These professionals are sworn to protect your privacy and will advise you in a caring and non-judgmental manner!

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