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Jailed Treasure Coast women talk about their addictions to prescription drugs

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Women paying the price of prescription drug addiction — those sitting in Treasure Coast jails — rattle off dosage amounts and medication names as if they are pharmacists.

They laugh when you ask where and how they get the drugs.

Pills are everywhere, they say.

And young white women are the people most at risk for addiction to prescription drugs. Nearly one in four white, teenaged girls have used prescription drugs, according to data released last week by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control & Prevention.

White girls are more likely than any other social group to use prescription drugs, according to the 2009 survey. Previous national studies of drug use have shown similar trends among adults.

Treasure Coast law enforcement agents and addiction counselors will tell you the trend is here.

Amanda Mitcheltree, 30, stole painkillers first from her father and then, after his death, from medicine cabinets in the homes she cleaned. Others popped pills given to them by friends, who took them from grandmas or aunts or neighbors.

If you can't find prescription pills easily among your friends and acquaintances, just about any doctor will give you the drugs, the addicts say.

Case in point: 26-year-old Ashley Shaw doctor-shopped successfully and repeatedly with a fake MRI and bogus prescription, both given to her by a boyfriend.

"I had never been to a doctor at all, and I was getting 240 roxies, 360 methadones and 60 xanax," Shaw said, describing one doctor's visit. "(With) just two sheets of paper."

These women are participating in the re-entry program started by Public Defender Diamond Litty in the four-county region — the Treasure Coast and Okeechobee — in 2003 as a way to keep repeat offenders out of county jails. The program has enrolled 700 inmates, according to the officials.

Alcohol and crack were the most commonly abused substances when the program started, officials say, but now, 90 percent of the women and 80 percent of the men are abusing prescription pills. They land in jail for stealing or dealing or other offenses related to their addiction.

“These are the moms, the daughters, the women driving minivans,” said David Gibbs, who counsels addicts in the re-entry program at the St. Lucie County Jail. “It’s the faces that are closest to us.”

The National Institute on Drug Abuse has collected data that shows women can be 55 percent more likely than men to be prescribed an abusable drug — narcotics or anti-anxiety medication. As Gibbs points out, women are more likely to go to the doctor in the first place, and legitimate prescriptions can turn into addictions for men and women.

Twenty-seven-year-old Louann Forte was prescribed oxycodone — up to six pills a day — after a car accident left her with a herniated disc.

Forte said she took them exactly as the doctor prescribed, every four hours, but began wanting them every three hours, and then even sooner. Once addicted, the women say they use the drugs just to feel normal. A day without pills feels like a day suffering through the worst flu.

But actual pain isn’t the only thing leading girls and women to prescription pills.

Marijuana was the only illegal drug Mitcheltree had used five years ago, when she first stole the painkillers her father, dying of cancer, had been prescribed. If Mitcheltree were a teenager now, she would be just as likely to have tried prescription pills as marijuana, according to CDC statistics.

Mitcheltree said she originally took the pills for a friend, but soon was popping — and then snorting — the medication herself. She had a 3-year-old daughter and full-time job as a waitress. She was depressed. The pills gave her the focus and energy to work more, make extra money and feel good, she said.

She got pregnant by a man who also was using. He died and Mitcheltree used more.

“It made the pain go away,” Mitcheltree said.

The story is one counselors hear often in all Treasure Coast counties. The 90-day re-entry program teaches life skills to nonviolent offenders, most of whom also are addicts, which usually is why they ended up in jail multiple times in the first place.

“The men come in the same ways, but they don’t bring the baggage with them,” St. Lucie County Sheriff’s Maj. Pat Tighe said.

For women, the baggage often amounts to men.

The friend Mitcheltree snagged pills for was a man; many young women start stealing or scamming pills for boyfriends.

Dealers “sponsor” people to go to doctors for prescriptions, often providing them with fake MRIs or other paperwork to support their claim of pain that requires OxyContin or similar narcotics.

Men can be sponsored, but usually the dealers use women. For their work, the women usually get a cut of the pills, which are worth as much as \$30 each.

“You start off wanting to sell them, but then the addiction gets so bad, you start using and giving them to your friends,” 23-year-old Rachael Durden said.

Durden is working through the re-entry program at the St. Lucie County jail. Most of the inmates dealing with prescription pill addiction are high school graduates. Many have some college education; often they have children.

Like Durden and Shaw, 23-year-old Jamie Forrester began her pill addiction being sponsored. She was 17.

Forrester has overdosed and landed in jail five times for drug-related charges. She’s been through two rehabs without success and just went through the re-entry program in Martin County. But, she said during her last two weeks in jail, after going through the re-entry program, she is done with pills.

“They make you feel like you’re braver. Nobody can touch you. Nobody know’s what’s going on,” Forrester said. “I feel brave now, just like I am.”

But her mother, Nancy Forrester, worries about Jamie's return to life outside of the jail, where she will have to navigate old friendships and relationships. Pills are everywhere.

“I think she can beat it as long as she doesn’t have all this drama,” Nancy Forrester said. “I keep telling her, ‘Jamie, you need to focus on you.’ ”

ABOUT THE RE-ENTRY PROGRAM

Created in 2003 by 19th Circuit Public Defender Diamond Litty in collaboration with law enforcement agencies in St. Lucie, Martin, Indian River and Okeechobee counties.

A variety of community groups and organizations, including the St. Lucie County Children’s Services Council and the Office of Mental Health & Substance Abuse, provide assistance.

Eligible inmates — nonviolent, repeat offenders — volunteer for the program, which teaches them basic life skills to become a productive member of the community.

The 90-day program offers weekly classes on topics such as financial planning, parenting, health, family relationships and substance abuse.

About 80 percent of participants are abusing alcohol, drugs or some combination of substances. Prescription drugs have become one of the most abused substances.

Following release, peer counselors are available for additional support.

Less than 20 percent of program graduates return to jail within a year of their release, a recidivism rate far below that of the general jail population.



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