The video begins with a series of candid comments: “I’ve seen people pop a pill and just collapse to the floor, sweating and shaking and spitting foam out of their mouths because they OD’d on something. They didn’t even know what they put in their system.” “A lot of prescription drugs have the same structures, the same effect on your brain as illegal drugs.” “What happens when you start taking all these drugs in large amounts? They start shutting down your organs.” The title appears: *All You Need to Know about Prescription & OTC Drugs in 17 Minutes.*

The program’s hosts start by defining prescription drugs as “medicines that require a doctor’s permission.” Over-the-counter (or OTC) drugs “are medications you can buy without a doctor’s prescription,” such as cough and cold medicines, allergy pills and sleeping aids. Both types of drugs are legal and safe, as long as they’re used properly. However, abusing these drugs in order to get high is a growing problem in the US—even among young people. The host explains, “Between five and nine percent of students under the age of 18 have abused these drugs in the past year, depending on which medication we’re talking about.” Viewers are warned that abusing prescription or OTC drugs could result in very dangerous consequences: addiction, overdose and even death.

The first video segment, *Proper vs. Improper Use,* attempts to clarify how prescription drugs can be used safely. Because there are so many ads for prescription drugs on television and in magazines, the hosts explain, “Some young people think that prescription drugs must be safe to take on your own, even if you don’t need to treat a real health problem.” In reality, there is great risk in taking a drug not prescribed for you or taking a greater quantity than that recommended by a doctor. Doctors prescribe medications in amounts safe for their patients, taking care not to prescribe anything that will negatively interact with a patient’s other medications. Allison Fulton, Substance Abuse Counselor and Executive Director of the Housatonic Valley Coalition against Substance Abuse, says, “If that pill bottle doesn’t have your name on it, if it didn’t come from your doctor and it isn’t for something that you need it for, you shouldn’t be taking it at all.” Tom Janette, Narcotics Educator, The Narcotics Enforcement Officers Association (NEOA), bluntly tells viewers, “It is illegal to possess controlled substances unless they were prescribed to you by a physician. Simply that—it’s illegal.”

*Types of Prescription Drugs* separates prescription medications into three major groups. In the first group are pain relievers such as Vicodin® and OxyContin®. These medications are opioids—made from the poppy plant in a manner similar to how heroin is made. When properly prescribed and administered, these drugs can help people deal with intense pain or injuries. However, if abused, they can cause a person to stop breathing and die. Depressants, such as Valium® and Xanax®, comprise the second group. These drugs are
typically used to relieve anxiety or as a sleep aid. Like the opioid pain relievers, depressants can drastically slow down breathing, cause a coma or even death if they are misused. The third group, stimulants, is composed of drugs such as those used to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Ritalin® and Adderall® are both stimulants similar to cocaine. In high doses, these drugs can stop the heart. The host asserts, “Prescription drugs are actually very similar to illegal drugs, and they can have the same risks when abused.”

The Dangerous Connections segment illustrates how dangerous prescription drug abuse is by comparing these legal medicines to their illegal counterparts. Opioids like OxyContin® and Vicodin® are extremely close chemically to heroin, for example, and abusing these drugs makes heroin abuse far more likely. Janette explains why many OxyContin® users switch to heroin: “You take Oxys over a period of time and pretty soon... you become addicted. But now the doctor realizes that you’re taking too much medication and cuts you off. So where do you go? You have to go to the same thing that has the same strength, and that’s heroin.” Elizabeth Robinson, a former addict, admits, “Everybody I knew doing Oxys always ended up on heroin.”

Health Risks reveals many of the risks related to abusing prescription or over-the-counter drugs. Choking, rashes, vomiting, heart irregularities and breathing problems can all result from taking unnecessary drugs or from exceeding the recommended dosage. Online pharmacies that sell drugs without a prescription are very dangerous. As the host explains, “Steer clear of these Internet pharmacies. They’re unregulated, so there’s no way to know if the drug you’re buying is what you think it is.”

The Lethal Mix segment introduces the concept of “polypharmacy,” or taking different drugs at the same time. This is very dangerous because drugs can interact with each other in unpredictable and potentially lethal ways. When alcohol is added to the mix, the risk of hazardous side effects increases dramatically. If you are taking a medicine for a valid health issue, your doctor or pharmacist can advise whether there are potential drug interactions. The hosts tell viewers that death from polypharmacy can occur even with OTC medications. “Accidentally combining different drugs at the same time can literally be deadly. But if you’re mixing drugs on purpose, to get high, you’re really playing a dangerous game.” Elizabeth Robinson recalls dangerous situations from her past that relate to polypharmacy: “I went to parties where they’ve had a bowl of pills on the table. I’ve taken a few out of there. They are mixed. You’re basically putting your hand in and taking what you want.”

Overdose and Death is the next segment. Francine Haight, nurse and founder of www.ryanscause.org, explains, “When you start taking all these drugs in large amounts, it starts shutting down your organs.” She tearfully describes how her teenage son Ryan overdosed on Vicodin®, which he had been abusing to get high. “I thought, ‘Okay,
something’s not right.’ I ran into his room and found him... and it was the worst day of my life. I tried to resuscitate him. I’m an RN, and I’m supposed to save lives. I couldn’t bring him back.” Kimberly Curry, Pharmacy Director of Waterbury Hospital, CT, explains the process that causes many overdose deaths from prescription opioids or depressants. “You get very sedated, and the more of this drug that you put in the system, the more likely that you can depress your brain enough where the body may stop telling your lungs to breathe. It can kill you, essentially.”

*Addiction and Withdrawal* deals with the side effects of continued drug use. By abusing drugs regularly, the body adjusts to the point where it needs the drug to function normally. Several addicts comment on how quickly they were hooked on prescription medications. Jaica says, “It altered my mood. It changed the way I felt. I was instantly addicted.” Ryan adds, “My friend did one first, then I did one. And we liked it so much that we did another one. And we were hooked pretty much right from there.”

The hosts explain that withdrawal is the addicted body’s response to being deprived of a drug. “You’re sick for days,” one former addict recalls. “It’s vomiting, fever, chills, body aches, bone aches.” Elizabeth Robinson describes it vividly: “You shake. You feel like you have bugs crawling out of your skin. Your heart races. You try to sleep, and your legs twitch so bad. It’s terrible. A flu times a million.” A young man agrees, “You don’t even care about being high anymore. You care about not being sick.”

*Over-the-Counter Drugs* addresses the common myth that since OTC drugs can be bought legally without a prescription, they must be safe. Several experts mention the potential risks of exceeding the recommended dosage of OTC medications. “Some of the drugs abused by young people,” a host explains, “include appetite suppressants, sleeping pills, pain relievers and cough or cold medicines.” Cough syrup for example, can cause severe abdominal pain and nausea if taken in large amounts. Thomas Janette points out, “Unfortunately, a lot of the OTCs have come into play and cause severe hallucinations. Benadryl®, Dramamine®, Sudafed®... but the biggest one being cough syrup. DXM, or dextromethorphan, is found in 120 products.” Kimberly Curry explains, “The deadly effects of dextromethorphan—or what they call DXM or Dex or Robo or Skittles—is when you break up that controlled release tablet, that tablet that was supposed to release that dextromethorphan over time. By taking a megadose of that, by breaking down that sustained release, the brain stops talking to the lungs to expand and contract and take in oxygen, which can lead to death.”

In the segment titled *Your Future*, the hosts discuss the potential consequences of prescription and OTC drug abuse. These drugs impair judgment and often lead to bad decision making. Several addicts talk about how they failed out of high school and college...
because of their drug use. Jaica admits that she would probably have been dead by her 20th birthday if she had kept taking drugs. One addict spells it out this way: “If your goal is to disappoint your family and to go around stealing everything, because that’s what it’s going to lead to, then go ahead. But if that’s not what you want in life, don’t even pick it up. Don’t even pick it up.”

*Getting Help* offers potential solutions if a student or friend is addicted to drugs. Viewers are reminded that getting help could save a drug abuser’s life. Dr. Terry Horton of Phoenix House Foundation asks viewers, “If you saw someone drowning and you let ‘em drown, how would you feel about yourself? If your friend is using any of these drugs, you can’t let ‘em drown. You have to reach out. If it’s not to their parents, to a teacher, to a counselor—but [reach out to] someone.”
The video and print materials in *All You Need to Know about Prescription & OTC Drugs in 17 Minutes* are compatible with the National Health Education Standards and Correlations as indicated below.

**National Health Education Standard 1:** *Students will comprehend concepts related to health promotion and disease prevention to enhance health.*

**Performance indicators for grades 6 - 8**

1.8.1 Analyze the relationship between healthy behaviors and personal health.
1.8.3 Analyze how the environment affects personal health.
1.8.4 Describe how family history can affect personal health.
1.8.5 Describe ways to reduce or prevent injuries and other adolescent health problems.
1.8.6 Explain how appropriate health care can promote personal health.
1.8.7 Describe the benefits and barriers to practicing healthy behaviors.
1.8.8 Examine the likelihood of injury or illness if engaging in unhealthy behaviors.
1.8.9 Examine the potential seriousness of injury or illness if engaging in unhealthy behaviors.

**National Health Education Standard 2:** *Students will analyze the influence of family, peers, culture, media, technology, and other factors on health behaviors.*

**Performance indicators for grades 6 - 8**

2.8.1 Examine how the family influences the health of adolescents.
2.8.2 Describe the influence of culture on health beliefs, practices, and behaviors.
2.8.3 Describe how peers influence healthy and unhealthy behaviors.
2.8.5 Analyze how messages from media influence health behaviors.
2.8.7 Explain how the perceptions of norms influence healthy and unhealthy behaviors.
2.8.8 Explain the influence of personal values and beliefs on individual health practices and behaviors.
2.8.9 Describe how some health risk behaviors can influence the likelihood of engaging in unhealthy behaviors.

**National Health Education Standard 3:** *Students will demonstrate the ability to access valid information, products, and services to enhance health.*

**Performance indicators for grades 6 - 8**

3.8.1 Analyze the validity of health information, products, and services.
3.8.2 Access valid health information from home, school, and community.
3.8.4 Describe situations that may require professional health services.

**National Health Education Standard 4:** *Students will demonstrate the ability to use interpersonal communication skills to enhance health and avoid or reduce health risks.*

**Performance indicators for grades 6 - 8**

4.8.1 Apply effective verbal and nonverbal communication skills to enhance health.
4.8.2 Demonstrate refusal and negotiation skills that avoid or reduce health risks.
4.8.4 Demonstrate how to ask for assistance to enhance the health of self and others.
National Health Education Standard 5: Students will demonstrate the ability to use decision-making skills to enhance health.

Performance indicators for grades 6 - 8
5.8.1 Identify circumstances that can help or hinder healthy decision making.
5.8.2 Determine when health-related situations require the application of a thoughtful decision-making process.
5.8.4 Distinguish between healthy and unhealthy alternatives to health-related issues or problems.
5.8.5 Predict the potential short-term impact of each alternative on self and others.
5.8.6 Choose healthy alternatives over unhealthy alternatives when making a decision.
5.8.7 Analyze the outcomes of a health-related decision.

National Health Education Standard 6: Students will demonstrate the ability to use goal-setting skills to enhance health.

Performance indicators for grades 6 - 8
6.8.1 Assess personal health practices.
6.8.2 Develop a goal to adopt, maintain, or improve a personal health practice.
6.8.3 Apply strategies and skills needed to attain a personal health goal.

National Health Education Standard 7: Students will demonstrate the ability to practice health-enhancing behaviors and avoid or reduce health risks.

Performance indicators for grades 6 - 8
7.8.1 Explain the importance of assuming responsibility for personal health behaviors.
7.8.2 Demonstrate healthy practices and behaviors that will maintain or improve the health of self and others.
7.8.3 Demonstrate behaviors to avoid or reduce health risks to self and others.

National Health Education Standard 8: Students will demonstrate the ability to advocate for personal, family, and community health.

Performance indicators for grades 6 - 8
8.8.1 State a health-enhancing position on a topic and support it with accurate information.
8.8.2 Demonstrate how to influence and support others to make positive health choices.
8.8.3 Work cooperatively to advocate for healthy individuals, families, and schools.