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AG: Youth prescription drug abuse on rise in ND

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By The Associated Press
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Young people are abusing prescription drugs with alarming frequency, sometimes during "pharm parties" where pills are set out like candy, a man whose son died of an overdose of painkillers told a conference Tuesday.

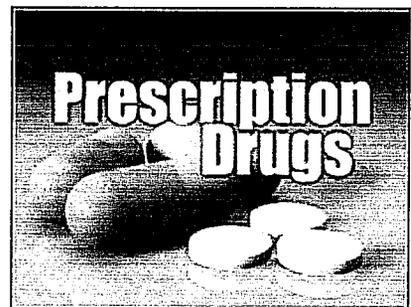
"Kids refer to them as skittles or trail mix," Dan Pearson said. "It's real. It's very real."

Pearson, of St. Cloud, Minn., spoke at the conference to brief social workers, medical professionals and law enforcement officers about what Attorney General Wayne Stenehjem says is a rising prescription drug abuse problem in North Dakota.

More than 300 people attended the conference. Stenehjem is holding another meeting Wednesday in Fargo and said he expected a similar turnout.

"We need to create and promote public awareness of the extent of this problem in North Dakota," the attorney general said. "The problem is out of control. Illegal prescription medications are everywhere."

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A separate 2008 survey by the National Institute on Drug Abuse found that 2.9 percent of eighth graders and 9.7 percent of high school seniors had abused Vicodin, a narcotic painkiller.

Pearson said the term "pharm parties" has entered the teenage lexicon, where young people bring prescription pills - some obtained from their parents' medicine cabinets - and dispense them in dishes or bags.

Dan Pearson has pushed for state and federal legislation to make it more difficult for Internet pharmacies to legally dispense drugs since the death of his son, Justin, on Christmas Day 2006. Justin, 24, used more than a dozen Internet pharmacies to feed his habit, his father said.

Justin Pearson began using painkillers after he suffered a broken shoulder and ruptured spleen in a four-wheeler accident, and to alleviate pain from two ruptured discs in his back. After his doctors cut off his pain prescriptions, he turned to the Internet, Dan Pearson said.

"With a few clicks of a mouse, the kids can get drugs," he said. "It's not like you have to go through any big hassle. It's like ordering pizza."

Minnesota and North Dakota's rules are among the nation's most stringent, Pearson said. This year, the North Dakota Legislature endorsed a new law that requires a face-to-face consultation with a doctor before a patient may fill a prescription at an Internet pharmacy.

Stenehjem has asked police stations in Fargo, Grand Forks, Minot and Bismarck to set out containers for people to drop off unneeded medications, which the Bureau of Criminal Investigation will collect for incineration.

The container in the Bismarck Police Department's lobby had been emptied three times by late afternoon Tuesday. Bismarck Police Sgt. Mark Buschena said at least a half-dozen people had visited Tuesday, including one woman who filled the two-gallon container almost half full with pill bottles.

"It appears as though there's a need for this," Buschena said.

The Fargo Police Department put out its container late Tuesday, said Liz Brocker, a spokeswoman for Stenehjem. Containers will be installed at the Grand Forks and Minot police departments Wednesday, spokesmen at the agencies said.

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