

ER Visits Involving Sleep Drug Overmedication Almost Doubles

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The number of emergency department visits involving the sleep drug zolpidem (the active ingredient in Ambien) almost doubled over four years, according to a new government report.

Zolpidem-related ER visits rose from 21,824 in 2005-2006, to 42,274 in 2009-2010, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) found.

In 2010, females accounted for two-thirds of zolpidem-related ER visits involving overmedication. The largest number of visits related to overmedication with the drug involved patients ages 45 to 54.

More than half of zolpidem-related ER visits also involved other prescription drugs, including other anti-anxiety and insomnia medications and narcotic pain relievers. In addition, 14 percent of visits involved alcohol combined with zolpidem.

Almost half of ER visits related to zolpidem overmedication resulted in either a hospital admission or a transfer to another medical facility. About one-quarter of these more serious cases involved admission to a critical or intensive care unit, the report noted.

CBS News reports that hospital ER visits involving drug-related suicide attempts in people ages 45 to 64 doubled from 2005 to 2011. In 2010 there were almost 5 million drug-related visits to emergency departments throughout the country, according to SAMHSA.

In 2013, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) required manufacturers of drugs containing zolpidem to reduce the recommended dose by half for females, in response to increasing numbers of reports of adverse reactions. The FDA suggested drug makers also reduce the recommended dose for men.

Zolpidem's side effects can include daytime drowsiness, hallucinations, dizziness, agitation and sleepwalking. When combined with other substances, the sedative effects of zolpidem can be dangerously enhanced, SAMHSA noted in a news release.