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Prescription Drug Abuse Takes Enormous Toll on Seniors

Prescription drug abuse is hitting the senior community hard, according to a review of government data conducted by *USA Today*.

The newspaper looked at overdose deaths, emergency room visits and admissions to addiction treatment programs.

"There's this growing group of seniors, they have pain, they have anxiety...and a lot of (doctors) have one thing in their tool box — a prescription pad," said Mel Pohl, Medical Director at the Las Vegas Recovery Center, which treats elderly patients for pain and drug dependence. "The doctor wants to make their life better, so they start on the meds." Patients build up a tolerance over time, or they suffer more pain and request more medication. "And without anyone necessarily realizing, it begins a downward spiral with horrible consequences," he told the newspaper.

Elderly patients are susceptible to complications from drug use, including falls, cognitive problems, respiratory failure and dementia, the article notes.

Older patients are receiving more opioid painkillers and benzodiazepines (such as Xanax and Valium). Last year, 55 million opioid prescriptions were written for people 65 and older, marking a 20 percent increase over five years—almost double the growth rate of the elderly population. During the same period, the number of benzodiazepine prescriptions rose 12 percent, to 28.4 million.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) found in 2012, the average number of elderly people misusing or dependent on prescription painkillers in the past year increased from 132,000 a decade ago, to 336,000.

Government data also shows a 46 percent increase in cases of adults 55 and older seeking substance abuse treatment for prescription narcotics from 2007 to 2011.

To learn more about **Seniors and Drugs**, please click here.