

Study Finds Increase in Number of Headache Patients Given Narcotics in the ER

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Contrary to the advice of many medical groups, more emergency departments are giving headache patients prescriptions for powerful narcotic painkillers, according to a new study.

Between 2001 and 2010, there was a 65 percent increase in emergency department use of narcotic prescriptions for headaches. Hydromorphone and oxycodone were two of the most frequently prescribed narcotics.

A number of groups, including the American College of Emergency Physicians and the American Academy of Neurology, say narcotics should not be used as a first-line treatment for headaches, HealthDay reports.

During the same period, there was no increase in ER prescriptions for non-narcotic pain relievers such as acetaminophen, nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medications, or triptans (drugs used to treat migraines).

The study authors, who presented their findings at the American College of Medical Toxicology annual meeting, said they are concerned about the findings, in part because of the increasing rates of abuse, overdose and deaths due to narcotics.

"These findings are particularly concerning given the magnitude of increase in [narcotic painkiller] prescribing compared to the other non-addictive medications, whose use remained the same or declined," lead investigator Dr. Maryann Mazer-Amirshahi of George Washington University said in a news release.

Co-researcher Dr. Jeanmarie Perrone of the University of Pennsylvania said several factors could be contributing to the increased narcotic prescriptions for headaches, including an increased focus on pain management, patient satisfaction, and regulatory requirements.