

Prescription Painkiller Overdoses – A Growing Epidemic, Especially Among Women



About 18 women die every day of a prescription painkiller overdose in the US, more than 6,600 deaths in 2010.

Prescription painkiller overdoses are an under-recognized and growing problem for women.

Although men are still more likely to die of prescription painkiller overdoses (more than 10,000 deaths in 2010), the gap between men and women is closing. Deaths from prescription painkiller overdose among women have risen more sharply than among men; since 1999 the percentage increase in deaths was more than 400% among women compared to 265% in men.

This rise relates closely to increased prescribing of these drugs during the past decade. Health care providers can help improve the way painkillers are prescribed while making sure women have access to safe, effective pain treatment.

When prescribing painkillers, health care providers can:

- Recognize that women are at risk of prescription painkiller overdose.
- Follow guidelines for responsible prescribing, including screening and monitoring for substance abuse and mental health problems.
- Use prescription drug monitoring programs to identify patients who may be improperly obtaining or using prescription painkillers and other drugs.

Prescription painkiller overdoses are a serious and growing problem among women.

- More than 5 times as many women died from prescription painkiller overdoses in 2010 as in 1999.
- Women between the ages of 25 and 54 are more likely than other age groups to go to the emergency department from prescription painkiller misuse or abuse. Women ages 45 to 54 have the highest risk of dying from a prescription painkiller overdose.*
- Non-Hispanic white and American Indian or Alaska Native women have the highest risk of

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dying from a prescription painkiller overdose.

- Prescription painkillers are involved in 1 in 10 suicides among women.

**Death data include unintentional, suicide, and other deaths. Emergency department visits only include suicide attempts if an illicit drug was involved in the attempt.*

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- Women are more likely to have chronic pain, be prescribed prescription painkillers, be given higher doses, and use them for longer time periods than men.
- Women may become dependent on prescription painkillers more quickly than men.
- Women may be more likely than men to engage in "doctor shopping" (obtaining prescriptions from multiple prescribers).
- Abuse of prescription painkillers by pregnant women can put an infant at risk. Cases of neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS)—which is a group of problems that can occur in newborns exposed to prescription painkillers or other drugs while in the womb—grew by almost 300% in the US between 2000 and 2009.

Note: Prescription painkillers" refers to opioid or narcotic pain relievers, including drugs such as Vicodin (hydrocodone), OxyContin (oxycodone), Opana (oxymorphone), and methadone.

Source: <http://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/PrescriptionPainkillerOverdoses/index.html>