Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
CDC 24/7: Saving Lives, Protecting People™

Prescription Drug Overdose in the United States: Fact Sheet

Overview

Definitions

Drug: Any chemical compound used for the diagnosis or treatment of disease or injury, for the relief of pain, or for the feeling it causes. A drug is either a pharmaceutical (including both prescription and over-the-counter products) or illicit.

Overdose: When a drug is eaten, inhaled, injected, or absorbed through the skin in excessive amounts and injures the body. Overdoses are either intentional or unintentional. If the person taking or giving a substance did not mean to cause harm, then it is unintentional.

Misuse or abuse: The use of illicit or prescription or over-the-counter drugs in a manner other than as directed.2

Deaths from drug overdose have been rising steadily over the past two decades and have become the leading cause of injury death in the United States.1 Every day in the United States, 114 people die as a result of drug overdose1, and another 6,748 are treated in emergency departments (ED) for the misuse or abuse of drugs.2 Nearly 9 out of 10 poisoning deaths are caused by drugs.3

The Problem

- Drug overdose was the leading cause of injury death in 2012. Among people 25 to 64 years old, drug overdose caused more deaths than motor vehicle traffic crashes.1
- Drug overdose death rates have been rising steadily since 1992 with a 117% increase from 1999 to 2012 alone.1
- In 2012, 33,175 (79.9%) of the 41,502 drug overdose deaths in the United States were unintentional, 5,465 (13.2%) were of suicidal intent, 80 (0.2%) were homicides, and 2,782 (6.7%) were of undetermined intent.1
- In 2011, drug misuse and abuse caused about 2.5 million emergency department (ED) visits. Of these, more than 1.4 million ED visits were related to pharmaceuticals.2
- Between 2004 and 2005, an estimated 71,000 children (18 or younger) were seen in EDs each year because of medication overdose (excluding self-harm, abuse and recreational drug use).4
- Among children under age 6, pharmaceuticals account for about 40% of all exposures reported to poison centers.5

Most Common Drugs Involved in Overdoses

- In 2012, of the 41,502 drug overdose deaths in the United States, 22,114 (53%) were related to pharmaceuticals.6
- Of the 22,114 deaths relating to pharmaceutical overdose in 2012, 16,007 (72%) involved opioid analgesics (also called opioid pain relievers or prescription painkillers), and 6,524 (30%) involved benzodiazepines.6 (Some deaths include more than one type of drug.)

- In 2011, about 1.4 million ED visits involved the nonmedical use of pharmaceuticals. Among those ED visits, 501,207 visits were related to anti-anxiety and insomnia medications, and 420,040 visits were related to opioid analgesics.2
- Benzodiazepines are frequently found among people treated in EDs for misusing or abusing drugs.2 People who died of drug overdoses often had a combination of benzodiazepines and opioid analgesics in their bodies.6

Costs

- In the United States, prescription opioid abuse costs were about $55.7 billion in 2007.7 Of this amount, 46% was attributable to workplace costs (e.g., lost productivity), 45% to healthcare costs (e.g., abuse treatment), and 9% to criminal justice costs.7

Risk Factors for Drug Overdose

Among those who died from drug overdose in 2012:

- Men were 59% more likely than women to die;
- Whites had the highest death rate, followed by American Indians/Alaska Natives and then blacks;
- The highest death rate was among people 45-49 years of age; and
- The lowest death rates were among children less than 15 years old because they do not abuse drugs as frequently as older people.1

Among people who misused or abused drugs and received treatment in emergency departments in 2011:

- 56% were males;
- 82% were people 21 or older.2

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