

Painkiller Overdose

Overdose deaths from prescription painkillers have skyrocketed in the past decade, claiming thousands of people annually, and making the problem a public health epidemic.

The most commonly abused substances were hydrocodone, oxycodone, methadone, and oxymorphone. These are known as opiates and are similar to the compounds found in opium. They are

used to treat and relieve pain, and are otherwise safe when taken in their proper dosage. Hydrocodone and oxycodone are found in some of the most frequently abused drugs, such as OxyContin, Percocet, Percodan, Vicodin, and Vicodin ES.

Common reasons for abuse included negligence, a desire to get “high,” or an attempt to treat continued pain that the user feels isn’t relieved by regular doses.

The most recent data reveals that overdoses killed nearly 15,000 people in 2008, over 3 times the number killed by these drugs in 1999, and more than cocaine and heroin overdoses combined. Nearly 500,000 ER visits in 2009 were due to people misusing or abusing prescription painkillers.

In Florida, overdosing on prescription drugs is particularly problematic, with the number of Floridians killed by painkiller overdoses surging by 249% since 2005. The drugs most commonly responsible were oxycodone, benzodi-



azepines (used to treat stress, anxiety, and seizures), methadone, and ethyl alcohol.

Even when you take the correct or prescribed dose of these medicines, side effects may occur. In addition to relieving pain, you may feel drowsy, confused, dazed, constipated, and possibly nauseous. When you take too much of these medications however, symptoms become much more serious, including extreme sleepiness, breathing problems, and small pupils.

The first thing that will likely occur is that you will become extremely sleepy. Depending on how much you take, this can range from struggling to stay awake to being completely unconscious. The most dangerous complication is the effect on your breathing, which in some cases can stop completely.

Risk Factors

Certain groups are more likely to abuse or overdose on prescription painkillers. The following groups are at the highest risk: whites and Native

Americans, men, middle-aged adults, and people who live in rural areas.

Addressing the Problem

Use prescription painkillers only as directed by a health care provider. Make sure no one else is using them, and avoid selling or sharing them with others

to prevent misuse and abuse. Most importantly, always store prescription painkillers in a secure place and dispose of them properly. To learn more, visit

<http://www.cdc.gov/Features/Vital-Signs/PainkillerOverdoses/>

HIGHLIGHTS

The National Poison Control Center (1-800-222-1222) can be called from anywhere in the United States. It will allow you to talk to experts in poisoning and overdosing, and can be called for non-emergencies as well.

If you have substance abuse problems that may increase your overdose risk, don't hesitate: call 1-800-662-HELP.

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