

# The malicious use of pharmaceuticals: An under-recognized form of child abuse

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Child abuse is a serious problem that affects nearly one million children a year in the United States alone. The American Academy of Pediatrics and the US Department of Health and Human Services classify child abuse into four categories including neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse. None of these categories, however, clearly includes the abusive use of drugs on children. A study soon to be published in the *Journal of Pediatrics* investigates the malicious use of pharmaceuticals and attempts to shed light on this under-recognized problem.

Dr. Shan Yin from the University of Colorado and the Rocky Mountain Poison Drug Center at Denver Health reviewed cases of pharmaceutical abuse reported to the National Poison Data System between 2000 and 2008. Dr. Yin included reports of the malicious use of alcohol, painkillers, cough and cold medicines, sedatives and sleeping pills, and antipsychotic medicines.

Of the more than 1400 cases studied, nearly 14% resulted in moderate to major consequences, including death. Nearly one-half of the abused children were exposed to at least one [sedative](#). An average of 160 cases, including two deaths, was reported each year. Motives and legal findings were unavailable for these particular cases; however, motives for the abusive use of drugs generally are varied, and can include punishment, amusement, or a wish for a break from childcare responsibilities.

This study illustrates the seriousness of the abusive use of drugs

administered to children. According to Dr. Yin, "The malicious administration of pharmaceuticals should be considered an important form of child abuse." He encourages pediatricians and emergency medical personnel to be on the watch for this form of maltreatment, and suggests the use of comprehensive [drug screening](#) during the evaluation of a child suspected to be the victim of abuse. Dr. Yin also cautions parents that the "non-therapeutic administration of pharmaceuticals to children can result in serious outcomes, including death."

**More information:** The study, reported in "Malicious Use of Pharmaceuticals in Children" by Shan Yin, MD, MPH, appears in the Journal of Pediatrics, [DOI:10.1016/j.jpeds.2010.05.040](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpeds.2010.05.040)

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