

# Young people driving epidemic of prescription drug abuse: Abuse of nonmedical analgesics up 40 percent

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A new study by the University of Colorado Denver reveals that today's adolescents are abusing prescription pain medications like vicodin, valium and oxycontin at a rate 40 percent higher than previous generations.

That makes it the second most common form of [illegal drug use](#) in the U.S. after marijuana, according to Richard Miech, Ph.D., lead author of the study and professor of sociology at CU Denver.

"Prescription drug use is the next big epidemic," Miech said. "Everyone in this field has recognized that there is a big increase in the abuse of nonmedical analgesics but our study shows that it is accelerating among today's generation of [adolescents](#)."

The study was published Tuesday in the [Journal of Adolescent Health](#).

It drew on data from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, a series of annual, nationally representative, cross-sectional surveys of U.S. drug use. The analysis used data from 1985 through 2009.

According to Miech, the prevalence of prescription [pain medication](#) abuse among the current generation of youth is "higher than any generation ever measured." This finding was present among subgroups of men, women, non-Hispanic whites, non-Hispanic blacks and

[Hispanics.](#)

Miech and his co-authors said a number of factors were driving this trend.

"The increasing availability of analgesics in the general population is well documented, as the total number of hydrocodone and [oxycodone](#) products prescribed legally in the U.S. increased more than fourfold from about 40 million in 1991 to nearly 180 million in 2007," the study said. "Higher prevalence of analgesics makes first-time NAU among contemporary youth easier than in the past because more homes have prescription analgesics in their medicine cabinets."

Miech said parents often model drug use behavior for their children.

"Youth who observe their parents taking analgesics as prescribed may come to the conclusion that any use of these drugs is OK and safe," he said.

Yet the consequences are often severe.

Miech said there are now more deaths due to accidental overdoses of these drugs than deaths due to overdoses of cocaine and heroin combined.

Most people who abuse prescription pain relievers report that they obtained them from family or friends.

"While most people recognize the dangers of leaving a loaded gun lying around the house," said Miech, "what few people realize is that far more people die as a result of unsecured prescription medications."

According to the study:

- Nonmedical analgesic use accounted for an increase in emergency room visits of 129 percent between 2004 and 2009.
- Between 1997 and 2007, NAU accounted for more than a 500 percent increase in the number of Americans seeking treatment for prescription opioid dependency.
- Prescription drug abuse led to a threefold increase in unintentional overdose mortality from the 1990s to 2007.

Miech, who studies [drug abuse](#) issues, published a paper last year in the American Sociological Review showing that of the 100 top causes of death, the biggest increase has been prescription drug overdose.

He concludes his more recent study by saying that there seems to be little social cost in abusing nonmedical analgesics.

"These results suggest that current policies and interventions are not yet effective enough to counter the factors that have increased nonmedical analgesic use among U.S. youth and the general population," he said.

"But it is critical that we devise a strategy to deal with an epidemic that shows little sign of ebbing."

Provided by University of Colorado Denver

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