FDA orders starker warnings on opioid painkillers

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The Food and Drug Administration is requiring stronger warning labels on prescription painkillers like OxyContin, in the government's latest attempt to reduce overdose deaths caused by the long-acting medications.

The changes announced Tuesday are designed to remind doctors and patients about the fatal risks of misusing and abusing opioid pain relievers, which include extended-release forms of oxycodone, hydrocodone and morphine.

The new label emphasizes that long-acting opioids are only for patients with "around-the-clock" pain that cannot be treated with over-the-counter medications or immediate-release opioids.

The FDA has issued a number of warnings about the dangers of prescription pain relievers in recent years but with little effect. Inappropriate use of opioids caused more than 16,650 overdose deaths in 2010, up more than 12 percent from 2008.