

Study finds doctors prescribing more sedatives

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Frequent use of these powerful drugs along with narcotic painkillers may explain more medication deaths.

(HealthDay)—Doctors in the United States are writing more prescriptions for sedatives than ever before, and the frequent use of these powerful drugs in combination with narcotic painkillers may be causing medication-related deaths, a new study suggests.

Sedatives are used to treat problems such as anxiety, mood disorders and insomnia, and include drugs such as Valium, Halcion, Xanax, Ativan and Librium.

For the study, researchers looked at 3.1 billion [primary care](#) visits made by Americans between 2002 and 2009, and found that 12.6 percent of those visits involved prescriptions for sedatives (benzodiazepines) or narcotic (opioid) painkillers. They also found that the number of prescriptions for sedatives increased 12.5 percent a year.

Patients who received narcotic painkiller prescriptions were 4.2 times more likely to also have sedative prescriptions, and the number of joint [prescriptions](#) of opioids and benzodiazepines rose 12 percent a year, the Stanford University researchers said.

Their findings were presented March 6 at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Pain Medicine, in Phoenix, Ariz. Research presented at medical meetings should be viewed as preliminary until published in a peer-reviewed journal.

"More research is needed to [identify] the reason behind the increase in benzodiazepine prescription, and a national effort is needed to highlight the danger of co-prescription of benzodiazepines and opioids," study principal investigator Dr. Sean Mackey, director of the Stanford Systems Neuroscience and Pain Lab, said in a pain academy news release.

The study showed that the use of sedatives and narcotic painkillers contribute to at least 30 percent of narcotic painkiller-related deaths, according to the investigators. They also noted there are a number of risks associated with sedative use, including falls in older people, emergency department visits and drug dependence.

Doctors need to be better educated about the risks of combining the two medications, and there needs to be better coordination between those who prescribe [narcotic painkillers](#) (often primary care doctors or pain specialists) and those who prescribe [sedatives](#) (often primary care doctors or psychiatrists), said study co-author Dr. Ming-Chih Kao, a clinical assistant professor at Stanford University Medical Center, in California.

More information: The Center for Substance Abuse Research at the University of Maryland has more about [sedatives](#).

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