

Sharp rise in ER visits tied to abuse of sedative, study finds

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Use of Xanax along with painkillers such as Oxycontin can be especially deadly, experts note.

(HealthDay)—There's been a steep increase in the number of Americans being treated at emergency departments for abuse of the sedative alprazolam, best known as Xanax, federal officials reported Thursday.

The number of emergency department visits related to abuse of alprazolam (brand names Xanax, Xanax XR, and Niravam) climbed from more than 57,000 in 2005 to nearly 124,000 in 2011, according to the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

"When used as directed, alprazolam is safe and effective, but misuse can result in serious health consequences," SAMHSA Administrator Pamela

Hyde said in an agency news release.

"This report highlights the need to educate people about the dangers of misusing or sharing prescription medications and the importance of properly disposing of unused medication," she added.

In the United States, alprazolam was the most commonly prescribed psychiatric medication in 2011 and the 13th highest-selling medication in 2012, the report said.

Medical experts weren't surprised by the new numbers.

"In 2010, Xanax alone accounted for more than 10 percent of all nonmedical use of [prescription medications](#) in the United States, [and] this illicit use more than doubled in five years," said Dr. Eric Collins, an addiction psychiatrist who is also physician-in-chief at Silver Hill Hospital in New Canaan, Conn.

He pointed to an even bigger threat.

Xanax abuse "is especially concerning in light of the dramatic rise in nonmedical use of opioid painkillers like oxycodone [Oxycontin] and Vicodin, because these increases in nonmedical use parallel the rapid rise in accidental overdose deaths in our country," Collins said.

"The combination of Xanax or other similar sedatives with opioid painkillers and/or alcohol is particularly dangerous because the combination can cause individuals to go to sleep and then stop breathing," he explained.

In total, there were about 1.2 million emergency department visits related to prescription [drug abuse](#) in 2011, SAMHSA noted.

Another expert agreed that the rate of increase of ER visits tied to [prescription drug abuse](#) is alarming.

"The widespread overprescribing of controlled substances, such as alprazolam, is leading to dangerous misuse and use in combination with other drugs," said Dr. Lewis Nelson, professor in the department of emergency medicine at NYU Langone Medical Center in New York City.

Collins said people can take steps to minimize the risks.

"Everyone with prescriptions for sedatives and opioid painkillers should lock them up while they are in use and dispose of them when there are leftover, unneeded supplies," he said. "Information on disposal can be obtained from local police departments, many of which will accept these medications for proper disposal."

The new report is based on data from SAMHSA's 2011 Drug Abuse Warning Network, which monitors drug-related [emergency department](#) visits nationwide.

More information: The U.S. National Library of Medicine has more about [prescription drug abuse](#).

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