

Fatal ODs from narcotic painkillers have tripled in US

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CDC report also finds surge in heroin-related overdose deaths.

(HealthDay)—The epidemic of prescription painkiller abuse continues to take a deadly toll in the United States, with fatal overdoses involving drugs such as Oxycontin and Vicodin tripling over a decade, a new report shows.

Deaths from another form of opiate, heroin, also nearly tripled between 1999 and 2012, according to the report released Tuesday by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

There was one glimmer of hope, however: In the last year of the study, 2011-2012, the CDC noted a 5 percent drop in [prescription painkiller](#) deaths, the first such decline ever.

The numbers echo similar findings released by the CDC in September. That report covered the years 1999 to 2011, and found steady year-by-year increases in [overdose deaths](#) linked to narcotic painkillers. However, there was one sign of hope in that study, too.

"Although the rate [of fatal overdoses] is still increasing, it is not increasing quite as fast as it did between 2000 and 2006," report co-author Dr. Holly Hedegaard, a CDC epidemiologist, said at the time. "From 1999 to 2006, the rate of deaths increased about 18 percent per year, but since 2006 it's only increasing about 3 percent per year."

In the latest report, released by the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics, researchers tracked data from the CDC's National Vital Statistics System. The study was led by Margaret Warner of the CDC's Division of Vital Statistics.

Her team found that, after adjusting for age, fatal overdoses involving prescription narcotic painkillers "more than tripled, from 1.4 [cases] per 100,000 [people] in 1999 to 5.1 in 2012."

The problem was rampant in certain states, with Kentucky, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah and West Virginia hardest hit. In West Virginia, 32 out of every 100,000 residents fell victim to an overdose of any kind of drug—the highest rate in the nation, the CDC said.

However, the rate of increase for such deaths has slowed nationwide. From 1999 through 2006, there was "an average increase of about 18 percent each year," the CDC authors said, but that has slowed since 2006.

And the 5 percent decline in narcotic painkiller deaths observed in 2011-2012 "is the first decrease seen in more than a decade," the CDC said.

Although it's tough to say why that slight decline may have occurred, health officials have moved to curb the spread of narcotic painkiller abuse. Certain forms of these drugs—such as hydrocodone (best known as Vicodin)—have become tougher to get due to recent regulatory changes by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

The FDA has also recently approved "abuse-resistant" forms of prescription painkiller pills that are much tougher to crush or dissolve, inhibiting users from snorting or injecting them.

But it's not only opiate-based painkillers that are the problem, the CDC noted. Rates of overdoses from an old foe, heroin, are also on the rise in the United States.

The new report found that "drug-poisoning deaths involving heroin nearly tripled, from 0.7 deaths per 100,000 in 1999 to 1.9 in 2012." And unlike the trend for prescription painkillers, the upsurge in heroin-related deaths shows no signs of slowing down. In fact, "between 2011 and 2012, the rate of drug-poisoning deaths involving heroin increased 35 percent," the CDC study authors said.

Dr. Andrew Kolodny is president of Physicians for Responsible Opioid Prescribing and chief medical officer of the Phoenix House Foundation in New York City. Speaking to *HealthDay* in September, he said he believed the "epidemic" of narcotic painkiller abuse can be brought under control.

"We have to stop creating new cases of addiction. That boils down to getting the medical community to prescribe more cautiously," he said. "It's not that doctors are intentionally causing an epidemic, but they are overprescribing painkillers, particularly for common chronic problems like lower back pain and headaches," he explained.

Kolodny said these painkillers are intended for use in the days following surgery or an accident, or as palliative care for cancer patients. The bulk of the prescribing, however, is for chronic conditions. "That's what's really fueling the epidemic," he said.

More information: There's more on spotting prescription painkiller addiction at the [U.S. National Institute on Drug Abuse](#).

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