

Amnesia affecting some opioid abusers

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(HealthDay)—Short-term memory loss may be yet another price of America's opioid addiction epidemic.

Massachusetts health officials reported Thursday a cluster of 14 [patients](#) in that state who experienced problems remembering things just told to them. Doctors call this sudden-onset amnesia. The patients also had abnormal results on MRI brain scans.

And researchers believe this might be the first sign of a new type of amnesia caused by drug use, likely opioids.

"The best thing that could happen is that maybe this would be nothing," said report co-author Dr. Alfred DeMaria Jr., Massachusetts state epidemiologist. "But we are suspicious that something is going on possibly related to substance abuse that was not recognized before."

From 2012 to 2016, 14 cases of people with the unusual neurological problem were identified from medical records. Thirteen of the 14 were either actively using substances or had a history of [substance abuse](#), DeMaria said.

Twelve said they had used opioids. These drugs include prescription painkillers, such as oxycodone (Oxycontin) and oxycodone and acetaminophen (Percocet), as well as heroin.

Six of those with amnesia also said they had used benzodiazepines, which are sedatives commonly prescribed to relieve anxiety. Examples include Klonopin (clonazepam) and Ativan (lorazepam). Another five of those with amnesia had used cocaine, the report revealed.

Although this study can't prove that narcotic use caused the amnesia, the number of patients reporting both can't be ignored, DeMaria said.

Also, DeMaria said the ages of the patients—19 to 52 years—make it unlikely their memory problems can be attributed to a stroke or dementia.

Moreover, the brain abnormalities seen on the MRI scans appear to be caused by a "toxic substance," rather than by damage to blood vessels, he added.

"We are concerned that maybe this represents that there is something new going on," DeMaria said.

Whether the memory problems are permanent isn't known, DeMaria said.

According to the report, published Jan. 27 in the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, most patients have improved over time. One patient regained complete memory at five months. Two patients, however, still had memory problems after a year.

DeMaria said even in some of those who have improved, memory problems persist. For example, some patients continue to forget directions and other information just given to them.

The researchers hope this report alerts doctors to the possibility that memory loss might be a result of opioid abuse. Doctors should be on the lookout for patients with these problems, DeMaria said.

Dr. Scott Krakower is assistant unit chief of psychiatry at Zucker Hillside Hospital in Glen Oaks, N.Y. He said he's "never seen anything like it, but this has to be explored more."

These memory problems might be linked to opioid use, Krakower said. "You always want to be cautious, because in the past things that appeared to be connected weren't," he added.

"It's possible that the narcotics may have triggered the [memory loss](#), but

it's hard to say," Krakower said. These [memory problems](#) highlight the need for doctors to ask such patients about their drug use, he concluded.

More information: For more on narcotic abuse, visit the [U.S. National Institute on Drug Abuse](#).

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