

# People with cerebral palsy could be in the crosshairs of the opioid crisis

April 25 2023, by Cara Murez

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People with cerebral palsy are more likely to be prescribed opioids to

manage pain, making them vulnerable to the ongoing opioid crisis in the United States, according to a new study.

While pain is common among patients with [cerebral palsy](#), [opioids](#) may not be as helpful for them because their pain is complex, researchers say.

Yet, recent research from the University of Michigan suggests that these patients are more likely to be prescribed opioids and at a higher volume for a longer time.

"There is little research on the mechanisms of pain as individuals with cerebral palsy age throughout their life," said lead author Daniel Whitney, an assistant professor of physical medicine and rehabilitation at Michigan Medicine in Ann Arbor.

"Opioids may be prescribed at a higher rate for this population, but if it is not very effective at managing their types of pain, the risk-benefit ratio of opioid therapy seems unfavorably lopsided," he said in a university news release.

Although opioids may manage short-term pain, they can have [side effects](#), including [mental health](#) and substance abuse disorders, balance issues and physical health problems.

"Opioids target specific pain mechanisms that can help with some elements of chronic pain, but there is a possibility that different routes for treatment can help target this pain more safely in terms of the person's overall health," said study contributor Dr. Ed Hurvitz, a physical medicine and rehabilitation specialist.

People with cerebral palsy may be more likely to experience the negative side effects of opioids, the authors said.

They hope their findings will prompt further research on appropriate [opioid](#) therapy and alternatives to pain care for patients with cerebral palsy.

Other common ways to treat pain caused by cerebral palsy range from over-the-counter pain killers to specific stretches and exercises. It's important for providers to talk with their patients about which methods work best for them, the authors said.

"The complex pain that patients with cerebral palsy experience can be treated in a variety of ways that have less side effects than opioids and create less exposure to the drug," said co-author Mark Peterson, an associate professor of physical medicine and rehabilitation. "If you are prescribed opioids for [pain](#) and don't feel that it is the right choice for you, it's important to speak up to your care provider and search for other options."

The findings were published recently in the *International Journal of Clinical Pharmacy*.

**More information:** Daniel G. Whitney et al, Population- and individual-level trajectories of opioid prescription patterns among adults with cerebral palsy: a retrospective cohort study, *International Journal of Clinical Pharmacy* (2023). [DOI: 10.1007/s11096-023-01553-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11096-023-01553-5)

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more on [cerebral palsy](#).

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