

# Study finds health care workers face increased risk for fatal drug overdoses

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A study of health care workers (HCWs) found that registered nurses, social or behavioral health workers, and health care support workers were at increased risk for drug overdose death, suggesting the need to

identify and intervene on those at high risk. The findings are published in *Annals of Internal Medicine*.

The increasing number of drug overdose deaths in the United States, mostly involving [opioids](#), has prompted efforts to identify high-risk populations and offer preventive interventions. Drug overdose risk among certain occupational groups is unknown. HCWs regularly prescribe or administer medicines, experience job stress, and engage in physically strenuous tasks that could put them at risk for musculoskeletal injury that could result in opioid dependency.

Researchers from Columbia University analyzed a prospective cohort of 176,000 HCWs aged 26 years and older between 2008 and 2019. The authors evaluated six HCW groups: [physicians](#); registered [nurses](#); other diagnosing and treating health care workers; health technicians; health care support workers; and social or behavioral health workers.

The authors found that 0.07% of their study sample died of a drug overdose during the follow-up period. They found that compared with employed adults who were not HCWs, the adjusted hazards of drug overdose deaths were significantly increased for social or behavioral health workers, registered nurses, and health care support workers.

According to the authors, the high risks for [drug overdose](#) among [health care workers](#) underscore the need for new initiatives to reduce health care worker stress, prevent burnout, identify at-risk workers, and, when necessary, accelerate their access to confidential substance use evaluation and treatment.

**More information:** Mark Olfson et al, Fatal Drug Overdose Risks of Health Care Workers in the United States, *Annals of Internal Medicine* (2023). [DOI: 10.7326/M23-0902](https://doi.org/10.7326/M23-0902)

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