

Even toddlers endangered by opioids, other addictive drugs

April 10 2018, by Dennis Thompson, Healthday Reporter



(HealthDay)—The youngest victims of America's addiction crisis are not

the teenagers tempted by tobacco, pot and pills.

Rather, they are tens of thousands of toddlers and preschoolers who are accidentally poisoned when they get into the drug stash of a parent or older sibling, claims a new report from the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse.

In 2016, U.S. poison control centers received an estimated 30,250 reports of [children](#) aged 5 and younger sickened by a wide array of addictive [substances](#)—everything from tobacco and e-cigarettes to marijuana and prescription opioid drugs, the report found.

"We think this is a largely overlooked problem as people think about and talk about the problem of [substance abuse](#) and addiction in our nation," said lead researcher Linda Richter, director of policy research and analysis at the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse.

All signs indicate that an increasing number of [young children](#) are being accidentally poisoned by their parents' pleasure products:

- Calls to poison control centers about e-cigarettes increased more than 1,400 percent over just three years. Half of all calls related to e-cigarettes and 95 percent related to tobacco cigarettes involved children under the age of 5.
- The number of young children exposed to alcohol has increased every year since 2012. Those aged 5 and younger account for about one of every four alcohol-related calls to a poison center.
- The rate of marijuana exposure among young children increased by 148 percent over an eight-year period. Children younger than 3 accounted for 78 percent of these calls to a poison center, most often from ingesting a marijuana edible.
- Exposures to prescription opioids increased 93 percent each year over a nine-year period, a rate that corresponds with the

progression of America's opioid epidemic. About half of ER visits among kids aged 5 and younger are linked with prescription drug exposure, with opioids like Oxycontin and Vicodin and benzodiazepines like Xanax the most common.

"Generally speaking, the rates are going up," Richter said. "What's concerning is the severity of the consequences seem to be increasing as well."

Seizures, coma and even death can occur to children poisoned by addictive substances, particularly those exposed to opioids. Even something like e-cigarettes can be deadly: In December 2014, a toddler in upstate New York died after swallowing liquid nicotine from an [e-cigarette](#), the report said.

And those serious effects—along with less dire consequences such as nausea, vomiting and disorientation—are only the immediate effects, experts add.

No one knows how the growing brain of a young child might be affected, said Dr. Harshal Kirane, director of addiction services at Staten Island University Hospital in New York City.

"Children are especially vulnerable in that their brains are still very much going through key developmental stages. Their personality and psyche is integrating and evolving," Kirane said. "Exposure to these kind of substances could have really unexpected effects that we are really just beginning to understand."

Part of the problem is that parents aren't taking proper steps to keep all addictive substances out of kids' hands, said Dr. Scott Krakower, assistant unit chief of psychiatry at Zucker Hillside Hospital in Glen Oaks, N.Y.

Besides prescription or illicit drugs, that includes tobacco, e-cigarettes and alcohol, Krakower said.

"We wouldn't want to leave pills out for a kid. For the same reason, we wouldn't want to leave our e-cigarette pen out for a kid," he said.

Parents also have to stay flexible in hiding their addictive products, Richter added.

"What might seem out of reach and out of sight one day, all of a sudden they're climbing and it's accessible the next day," she explained.

Part of the problem is that manufacturers make the products appealing to small children, Richter said.

E-cigarettes are packaged with colorful designs and fun flavors, she said. Alcoholic beverages are mixed with fruit flavors and sold in cans resembling soda and juice.

The most disturbing trend involves marijuana products in states that have legalized recreational or medicinal use, Richter said. Dispensaries sell marijuana edibles in forms that would appeal greatly to young children—cookies, brownies and candies such as gummy worms.

"They're made to look like other kinds of candy that kids like," Richter said.

Elected officials and policy makers should consider steps to rein in these products and make them less intriguing to young children, Richter said.

"There hasn't been enough will to put those requirements into place," she said.

In the meantime, parents can protect their kids by:

- Storing [addictive substances](#) out of sight and reach, and keeping medicine in its child-resistant packaging.
- Limiting addictive products in your home, by getting rid of those you don't need.
- Returning unused prescription medications to a pharmacy or hospital.
- Setting a good example. For example, refrain from using tobacco, e-cigarettes or marijuana, since secondhand exposure can also affect kids.

"Families aren't always aware that even secondhand exposure to these substances can have a detrimental effect to kids growing up, much less an accidental ingestion," Krakower said.

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Visit the [U.S. National Institute on Drug Abuse](#) for more on opioids and benzodiazepines.

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Citation: Even toddlers endangered by opioids, other addictive drugs (2018, April 10) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-04-toddlers-endangered-opioids-addictive-drugs.html>

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