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Information and Resources

Drug-Related Poisonings Land Many in ER

Emergency Departments Treat an Estimated 700,000 Yearly for Drug Poisonings, Many of Them Children

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WebMD Health News

Reviewed by [Laura J. Martin, MD](#)

Feb. 28, 2011 -- Drug-related poisonings send hundreds of thousands of people to emergency rooms every year in the United States, including many people who have overdosed on prescription [medications](#), a new study indicates.

The study also found that children aged 5 and younger had a higher rate of emergency department visits for unintentional drug-related poisonings than all other age groups.

"Despite the fact that successful prevention strategies targeted at young children have helped to decrease the occurrence of drug-related poisonings in this population, the number of unintentional poisonings among this age group is still too high," Gary Smith, MD, DrPH, of Nationwide Children's Hospital in Columbus, Ohio, says in a statement.

The study, he says, reinforces the importance of stepping up efforts to prevent unintentional drug exposures among young children.

Researchers at the Center for Injury Research and Policy of the Research Institute at Nationwide Children's Hospital looked at emergency room visits for drug-related poisonings in 2007.

Commonly Abused Prescription and Over-the-Counter Drugs

ER Visits, Costs Mount

That year, researchers say an estimated 700,000 emergency department visits were for drug-related poisonings. That's an average of 1,900 people per day. These visits cost nearly \$1.4 billion a year, or about \$3.8 million per day in emergency department charges.

"The magnitude of these findings is staggering," Smith says. "The number and cost of drug-related poisonings identified in this study indicate a public health emergency that requires a decisive and coordinated response at national, state, and local levels."

Researchers say drug-related poisonings have been on the rise over the past decade and that in many states, drug-related deaths have surpassed motor vehicle fatalities.

Antidepressants and Tranquilizers Big Part of Problem

Other key findings of the study:

[Antidepressants](#) and tranquilizers account for 24% of the drug-related poisonings treated in emergency rooms.

Pain and fever control medicines were responsible for 23% of the emergency department visits for drug-related poisonings.

Among cases involving antidepressants and tranquilizers, 52% were [suicidal](#) poisonings, and 30% were unintentional.

41% of poisonings by pain and fever control medicines were suicidal, and 40% unintentional.

"The current epidemic of drug-related poisonings has a new face," says Smith, who is also a professor of pediatrics at The Ohio State University College of Medicine. "Unlike epidemics in the past involving illegal drugs, such as heroin and crack [cocaine](#), misuse of [prescription drugs](#), especially opioid pain medications, is now the cause of an unprecedented number of emergency department visits and deaths."

Smith also says the rate of emergency department visits for drug-related poisoning is three times higher in rural areas than in non-rural areas.

The researchers point out that antidepressants and pain medications were responsible for nearly 44% of emergency department visits for drug-related poisonings in 2007.

Increases Sales of Pain Relievers Also Part of Problem

The authors write that the growing number of emergency department visits involving drug-related poisonings is associated with a "large increase" in the sales of [methadone](#), [oxycodone](#), and [hydrocodone](#). The three [opioids](#) have seen huge increases in sales in recent years. For example, sales of methadone increased 933% from 1997 to 2005.

SOURCES:

News release, Nationwide Children's Hospital.

Xiang, Y. *American Journal of Emergency Medicine*, March 2011.

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