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Hazards: Misuse of Drugs Crowds Emergency Rooms

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Some 700,000 Americans are taken to the hospital each year after ingesting drugs, both legal and illegal, a new study reports. And the care costs nearly \$1.4 billion in emergency room charges alone.

The study, published in the March issue of [The American Journal of Emergency Medicine](#), was based on data from the 2007 Nationwide Emergency Department Sample, a government database that includes information on 27 million visits to 970 emergency rooms in 27 states.

Children younger than 6 had a higher rate of emergency visits for accidental drug poisoning than any other age group, but most of the visits were precautionary, said the study's lead author, Dr. Gary Smith, director of the Center for Injury Research and Policy at Nationwide Children's Hospital in Columbus, Ohio: the children did not ingest toxic levels of medication.

Drug-related poisonings are increasingly a rural epidemic: the rate in rural areas was three times that of other areas.

Injuries from misuse of drugs have been increasing for the past decade. A growing number involve prescription drugs, especially opioid painkillers like methadone, oxycodone and hydrocodone, which Dr. Smith says are being prescribed in record numbers. In 2007, the year covered, [antidepressants](#) and [pain medications](#) were responsible for 44 percent of emergency room visits for drug-related poisoning.