



Saving Lives and Protecting People:

Preventing Prescription Painkiller Overdoses

Overdose deaths have skyrocketed in the past decade, largely because of prescription painkillers. The stories are tragic: A father whose addiction to prescription painkillers ended in a fatal overdose. A teen who died after taking prescription painkillers stolen from a friend's grandmother. Nine members of one small community who overdosed on painkillers they got from pain clinics.

Overdoses of prescription painkillers (also called opioid or narcotic pain relievers) have more than tripled in the past 20 years, killing more than 15,500 people in the United States in 2009.^{1,2}

Overdose deaths are only part of the problem—for each death involving prescription painkillers, hundreds of people abuse or misuse these drugs³:

- Emergency department visits for prescription painkiller abuse or misuse have doubled in the past 5 years to nearly half a million.³
- About 12 million American teens and adults reported using prescription painkillers to get “high” or for other nonmedical reasons.⁴
- Nonmedical use of prescription painkillers costs more than \$72.5 billion each year in direct health care costs.²

Putting Science into Action to Prevent Prescription Painkiller Overdoses

For more than 20 years, CDC's Injury Center has helped protect Americans from violence and injury threats. We are the nation's leading authority on violence and injury. We study violence and injuries and research the best ways to prevent them, applying science for real-world solutions to keep people safe, healthy, and productive.

Preventing prescription painkiller overdoses is one of the Injury Center's focus areas. Here are just a few examples of our efforts to address this growing issue:

Improving Systems to Track Prescriptions and Identify Misuse

- The Injury Center is researching ways to enhance state prescription drug monitoring programs, which track prescriptions for controlled substances (such as prescription painkillers). In addition, we are collaborating to improve federal data systems and to link state data and electronic medical records. Improved systems will provide better science to guide prevention efforts.

For every  **overdose death** from prescription painkillers there are¹...

10
treatment admissions for abuse

32
emergency department visits for misuse or abuse

130
people who abuse or are dependent

825
people who take prescription painkillers for **nonmedical use**



Identifying Prevention Policies and Programs that Work

- The Injury Center is tracking and evaluating state policies and programs, like those to prevent “doctor shopping” and “pill mills.” Such policies and programs can prevent prescription painkiller misuse and overdose while ensuring access to safe, effective pain treatment for those who need it. Effective policies and programs can serve as models for other states.



Increasing Health Care Provider Accountability

- The Injury Center is promoting efforts to ensure that health care providers follow science-based guidelines for safe and effective prescribing of painkillers. The increase in overdose deaths parallels a sharp rise in the sale of prescription painkillers.¹ We are tracking trends in prescribing rates and daily doses, studying differences from state to state, and identifying patterns of improper prescribing behaviors. Identifying health care providers who prescribe painkillers inappropriately could reduce overdoses and misuse.

Educating Health Care Providers, Policy Makers, and the Public

- The Injury Center’s two *Vital Signs* packages, *Prescription Painkiller Overdoses in the U.S.* and *Use and Abuse of Methadone as a Painkiller*, spotlight this issue and its effect on the nation’s health. We use these materials to engage states, health care providers, insurers, and consumers in steps to prevent prescription painkiller overdoses and misuse.
- *Policy Impact: Prescription Painkiller Overdoses* presents evidence-based policy approaches to help reverse the prescription painkiller overdose epidemic.



IN THE UNITED STATES

Enough prescription painkillers were prescribed in 2010 to **medicate every American adult around-the-clock for one month.**

Although most of these pills were prescribed for a medical purpose, many ended up in the hands of people who misused or abused them.¹



CDC Works 24/7 to Save Lives and Protect People

CDC’s Injury Center is committed to saving lives, protecting people, and lowering the health and societal costs of prescription painkiller overdoses and misuse. Our goal is to offer states, health care providers, professional organizations, and the public timely, accurate information and useful tools and resources to address this rapidly growing problem. Take action today by learning more about ways you can protect yourself and others from prescription painkiller overdoses!

To learn more about CDC’s Injury Center and its life-saving work, visit www.cdc.gov/injury.