

## **Overview of Opioid Risk**

Prescription painkiller overdoses are a public health epidemic. In 2008, prescription painkiller overdoses killed nearly 15,000 people in the United States.

In the 1990's, New Mexico saw an alarming upsurge in unintentional drug overdose death rates. Over the past two decades, overdose deaths involving illicit drugs have increased steadily, and have grown substantially. At 27 drug overdose deaths for every 100,000 people, New Mexico currently holds the highest drug overdose rate in the United States. Data collected from the years of 2005-2009 indicate that nearly 40% of these deaths were caused by prescription opioids. The prescribing process for opioid medications can be seen as a driving force behind this escalating death rate, as more opioid prescriptions are administered for pain management today than ever before.

## **Factual Information on the Risks of Using Opioids**

Certain groups are at a greater risk to abuse or overdose on prescription painkillers.

1. In 2008, the most recent year for which state comparison data are available, New Mexico had the highest drug overdose death rate in the United States. New Mexico's rate (27.0 per 100,000 population) was 2.3 times the U.S. rate (11.9).
2. New Mexico opioid pain reliever overdose death rates by race/ethnicity were substantially higher than U.S. rates for Hispanics.
3. More men than women die of overdose from prescription painkillers. Middle-aged men are most at risk for opioid overdose.
4. People in rural counties are nearly twice as likely to overdose on prescription painkillers as people in big cities in the United States.
5. The proportion of New Mexico high school students who used pain killers to get high in the past 30 days, increased from 11.7% in 2007 to 14.3% in 2009.
6. With daily opioid use, physical dependence and tolerance can develop in weeks or even in days.
7. Risks of unsafe drug use increase with prescribed dose of opioids and are greater for extended release medications with long half life.

## **Safe use of Opioids**

### **Suggestions for Patients**

1. Use prescription painkillers only as directed by a health care provider.
2. Build a partnership with your physician by discussing any substance abuse history you or members of your family may have.
3. Talk to your doctor about your pain control needs and strategies.
4. See the same doctor every time, and use only one pharmacy to fill prescriptions.
5. Schedule appointments before your opioid prescription runs out.
6. Never drink alcohol with opiates.

7. Protect your medication and your family by keeping it in a secure place.
8. Plan ahead to stop taking opiates when no longer needed for pain and when non-opiates are sufficiently effective for pain management.
9. Talk with your doctor about how to decrease your medication to prevent withdrawal reactions.
10. Dispose of any unused medication when no longer needed by flushing it down the toilet.

### **Suggestions for Physicians**

1. Opioid medication should only be used for treatment of acute pain when the severity of the pain warrants the choice and when other medications and therapies have not proven useful.
2. Physicians should explain to patients that opioids are for time- limited use.
3. Do not assume that patients know how to use opioids safely, or that opioids will be used as intended.
4. Patients should be screened for depression and other psychiatric disorders before prescribing opioids for long term use.
5. The therapeutic goals of prescribing opioids as well as the risks should be discussed with patients. Ideally a written and signed treatment agreement should be utilized for patients who are prescribed opioids. Where can this be found?
6. Physicians should discuss substance abuse histories with clients prior to prescribing, and should consult third parties such as medical records and prescription drug monitoring programs.
7. Limit prescription sizes to amounts that are likely to be needed by the patient in order to reduce the likelihood of diversion for recreational uses.

### **Related Links**

- [Vital Signs: Overdoses of Prescription Opioid Pain Relievers—United States, 1999–2008 \(link to come\): Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report \(MMWR\)](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6043a4.htm?s_cid=mm6043a4_w)  
[http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6043a4.htm?s\\_cid=mm6043a4\\_w](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6043a4.htm?s_cid=mm6043a4_w)
- [CDC Feature- Prescription Painkiller Overdoses in the U.S.](http://www.cdc.gov/Features/Vitalsigns/PainkillerOverdoses/)  
<http://www.cdc.gov/Features/Vitalsigns/PainkillerOverdoses/>
- [Cautious, Evidence-Based Opioid Prescribing. Physicians for Responsible Opioid Prescribing. www.responsibleopioidprescribing.org](http://www.responsibleopioidprescribing.org)
- [Prescription Painkiller Overdoses in the U.S. – What You Need to Know \[PODCAST - 1:15 minutes\]](#)
- [Sobredosis de medicamentos recetados para el dolor en los EE. UU.: Lo que usted necesita saber \[PODCAST - 1:39 minutes\]](#)
- [Prescription Painkiller Overdoses in the U.S. – What You Need to Know \[PSA - 0:60 seconds\]](#)
- [Policy Impact: Prescription Painkiller Overdoses](#)
- [Unintentional Poisoning](#)