



Although Still Alarming High, Prescription Opioid Abuse Has Plateaued

Nonprescription use of drugs like Vicodin can lead to injection drug use, which raises the risk of hepatitis C and HIV infection.

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After increasing dramatically during the early 2000s, the rate of prescription opioid abuse in the United States appears to have plateaued during more recent years. This encouraging sign notwithstanding, researchers specializing in the opioid addiction epidemic remain concerned that they do not see signs of declining abuse of such drugs.

Nonprescription use of opioid medications such as Vicodin (hydrocodone/acetaminophen) and OxyContin (oxycodone HCl) can lead to addiction. Some of those addicted to such medications begin using heroin as a cheaper and more readily available alternative. Injection drug use itself is associated with a risk of hepatitis C virus (HCV) in particular as well as HIV.

Presenting their findings at the Anesthesiology 2017 annual meeting, researchers analyzed data from the annual National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH). They found that in 2000, 8.6 percent of U.S. residents reported ever abusing prescription opioids (meaning they took the drugs without a prescription), a figure that rose to 13.2 percent by 2003 and has remained steady in the years since; in 2014, 13.6 percent of U.S. residents reported such drug abuse.

Reported abuse of drugs containing hydrocodone, including Vicodin, rose from 3.2 percent in 2000 to 9.1 percent in 2014. OxyContin abuse rose from less than 1 percent in 2000 to 3 percent in 2014.

“The amount of opioid prescriptions being written in the United States is breathtaking—essentially enough for every American adult to have a bottle of the painkillers in their medicine cabinet,” said Asokumar Buvanendran, MD, the lead author of the study, director of orthopedic anesthesia and vice chair for research at Rush Medical College, Chicago, and chair of the American Society of Anesthesiologists (ASA) Committee on Pain Medicine, in a press release. “This in turn leads to opioid abuse because people may take more than needed, or the pills fall into the wrong hands. That’s got to change.”

To read a press release about the study, [click here](#).

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