



A CUP OF HEALTH WITH CDC

Drug Overdose Deaths

What do we know about drug overdose deaths in the United States?

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[Announcer] This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC – safer, healthier people.

[Matthew Reynolds] Welcome to *A Cup of Health with CDC*, a weekly broadcast of the MMWR, the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. I'm your host, Matthew Reynolds. More than 50 people die of unintentional drug overdoses in the United States each day. Poisoning, whether from prescription or illegal drugs, is now second only to motor-vehicle crashes as a cause of unintentional injury deaths. Drug overdoses are a growing problem. The rate of deadly drug overdoses has increased nearly 70% since 1999.

Here to discuss these recent trends is Dr. Len Paulozzi. Dr. Paulozzi is a researcher in CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control and the lead author of a new study on unintentional drug overdoses. Welcome to the show, Dr. Paulozzi.

[Dr. Paulozzi] Thank you for having me, Matthew. It's a pleasure being here.

[Matthew Reynolds] Dr. Paulozzi, what did your study show about the number of drug overdose deaths in the past few years? In other words, are you seeing changes in the number and kinds of drug overdoses?

[Dr. Paulozzi] Well, our study showed that the number of drug poisoning deaths or drug overdoses rose from a little over 11,000 in 1999 to almost 20,000 in 2004, and that was a 68% increase in the rate. The largest increase was in the category called psychotherapeutic drugs where the rates went up 84%. However, the category that contained the most deaths, almost 10,000 of these deaths in 2004, was the narcotics category, and it went up 55%. This category includes prescription narcotic painkillers, cocaine, and heroin.

[Matthew Reynolds] I didn't realize that drug overdoses were that common. How do unintentional drug poisoning deaths compare with other causes of unintentional injury and death?

[Dr. Paulozzi] Poisoning [deaths], of which drug poisoning accounts for about 95%, are now second only to motor vehicle crashes as the leading cause of unintentional injury death in the United States, and they're rising fast.

[Matthew Reynolds] I know it may be difficult to generalize, but were you able to reach any conclusions regarding the 'typical' victim of a drug overdose?

[Dr. Paulozzi] Yes. Drug overdoses – these poisoning deaths – are really twice as common in men as women, so men account for about 2/3 of the drug overdose deaths, and people 35-54 years of age – middle age people – clearly have the highest rates. In fact, people in this age group accounted for 60% of all the poisoning deaths in 2004.

[Matthew Reynolds] I suppose a study like this might reveal changes in the number and circumstances of deaths from drug overdoses. What were you able to learn about trends in drug overdose deaths in the United States?

[Dr. Paulozzi] Well, we saw that rates in white people were going up much faster than rates in blacks. In fact, white rates passed rates for African Americans for both sexes between 1999 and 2004. Furthermore, rates among non-Hispanics went up much more than rates among Hispanics. Rates among American Indian Alaska Natives also rose over 50%.

[Matthew Reynolds] I hear the term “drug overdose” used quite a bit. Are you seeing trends in the kinds of drugs that lead to these overdoses?

[Dr. Paulozzi] Yes we are. As I mentioned, we saw increases in the psychotherapeutic drugs and in the category we call narcotics. Other studies previous to this one have suggested that a lot of these deaths are occurring among people who are taking prescription drugs and especially among people who are abusing prescription drugs. And these other studies single out narcotic painkillers as a particularly important contributor to these deaths.

[Matthew Reynolds] It sounds as if your study is revealing an alarming increase in the number of deaths from drug overdoses. Do you have any ideas about why we are seeing such a large increase?

[Dr. Paulozzi] Well, there has been a really dramatic increase in the use of these narcotic painkillers and psychotherapeutic drugs to treat anxiety and depression, insomnia in recent years. And the death rates have gone up in parallel with those increases. So we have some ideas that the increases are related to increases in prescribing and availability of this class of drugs.

[Matthew Reynolds] I understand that you found an increase in the drug poisoning deaths in rural areas. Why is this problem growing so much faster in rural communities?

[Dr. Paulozzi] Well, you're right about that. We did find that. The largest increases in this study were in the South and the Midwest, and those are the most rural parts of the country, so it's the most rural states that are seeing the largest increase in their rates. We're not exactly sure why this is happening, however, but it might be related to regional differences in drug use, in drug abuse, or even in drug abuse control measures. We're trying to figure this out now.

[Matthew Reynolds] Since you found that some people died as a result of prescription drug overdoses, do you have any recommendations for people who are taking prescription drugs? Are they safe?

[Dr. Paulozzi] Well, prescription drugs are safe when they're taken as directed. People get into trouble when they start to use the drugs recreationally or take more than the prescribed amounts in an attempt, for example, to get faster or more effective pain relief. The narcotic painkillers, in particular, are powerful drugs with an addictive potential and they must be used with close monitoring by a physician.

[Matthew Reynolds] Well Dr. Paulozzi, thank you for taking the time to talk to us today.

[Dr. Paulozzi] You're welcome. Thank you for inviting me.

[Matthew Reynolds] That's it for this week's show. Don't forget to join us next week. Until then, be well. This is Matthew Reynolds for *A Cup of Health with CDC*.

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