

Opioid Overdose More Likely If Family Members Have Prescription History



The risk for an opioid overdose is higher in households where a family member was previously prescribed these drugs, according to a new study.

The overdose risk increases with the amount prescribed. When a family member is prescribed a dose of opioids equivalent to 50 to 90 morphine milligram equivalents (MMEs) per day, the overdose risk is nearly eight times higher, and more than 15 times higher with doses above 90 MMEs, the study found. Even when a family member receives 50 MMEs per day, the overdose risk is three times higher than it would be in a family without a history of opioid prescription.

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In an effort to reduce overdoses, many states have created programs to restrict opioid prescriptions or are considering limiting the maximum daily doses that can be prescribed. When patients store unused pills, misuse becomes more likely. According to senior study author Joshua Gagne, MD, of Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School, both in Boston, opioids should be stored in a medication lock box at home. Proper disposal of leftover pills is also crucial.

The authors of the study, which was published in *JAMA Internal Medicine* (2019 Jun 24. [Epub ahead of print]), noted that more than 42,000 people died from opioid overdoses in the United States in 2016 alone. In that same year, approximately 11.5 million people misused opioid prescriptions and more than 2 million people misused opioid prescriptions for the first time.

The study's findings were derived from insurance claims data collected from 2004 to 2015, on 2,303 individuals who overdosed and 9,212 who did not.

A limitation of the study was that researchers could not determine whether any family members lived in different households, which would affect the availability of drugs. In addition, it was unclear whether overdoses were caused by prescription opioids or illegal drugs such as heroin.

—Anna DeNelsky