



## Team 8 Investigates Methadone prescriptions

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Posted Feb. 19, 2008  
11:45 PM

(WTNH) \_ It's a drug most often associated with helping heroin addicts beat their addiction, but a Team 8 Investigation has uncovered that doctors are increasingly prescribing Methadone for such things as back pain, and it's causing controversy.

Why is it so controversial? Because not only are the number of people taking Methadone at their doctor's direction skyrocketing -- so are the number of people dying from Methadone-related deaths.

So who's taking the drug? You may be surprised. She's not trying to kick a heroin habit. In fact, she's not addicted to anything at all. So, why was a soccer mom from Clinton prescribed Methadone? "A back injury," she says.

That's right! Severe back pain. When her doctor, a specialist in pain management, wrote the prescription her reaction was, "I was embarrassed...I did not want to take it because I was afraid of the stereotype."

But Methadone is increasingly being used to treat people with chronic pain across the nation and here in Connecticut. An increasing number of people are being prescribed Methadone and an increasing number of people are dying from Methadone-related deaths.

Those facts have the state's Director of Drug Control more than a little alarmed. "Any time you see any increase from any controlled substance being prescribed in great quantities with tragic results we are concerned."

What does John Gadea, the state's Director, mean by great quantities? Nationally, the number of Methadone prescriptions has increased by over 250 percent since 1999. And the D.E.A. says Connecticut is among the top 10 states when it comes to Methadone distribution.

According to the National Center for Health Statistics, in the last 8 years, Methadone-related deaths have skyrocketed in Connecticut -- from 10 in 1999 to 58 in 2006.

"Most studies nationwide indicate that it's primarily in pain management," Gadea says. What Gadea means is those prescribed Methadone for pain are often sent off with prescriptions and multiple refills without regular monitoring by their doctors.

"That's a concern to me because I know that's not the intent neither from the manufacturer or clinicians who have used it through the drug's history," Gadea notes.

In comparison, heroin addicts have always been given Methadone at clinics and regularly monitored. Melissa Zuppari, president of Helping Americans Reduce Methadone Deaths, says Methadone's unique properties make it particularly dangerous without constant monitoring.

"Methadone stays in your body for a very long time," Zuppari says. "It doesn't interact well with many other drugs at all. Anti-depressants, Benzo-valium, Xanax sleeping medication...it just doesn't work with those...it makes Methadone stronger in your system."

Mixing Methadone and other prescription drugs is what caused the deaths of both Anna Nicole Smith and her son. "When I heard Anna Nicole Smith was taking Methadone, I turned to my husband and said that could have been me," the Clinton mom says.

Like Anna Nicole Smith, the shoreline soccer mom was taking other medications including Vicodin, prescribed to her by her doctor. "My husband would wake me and say that I was making crazy noises...and I would wake up like oh my god I couldn't breath."

The Clinton woman finally demanded her doctor take her off Methadone. But a Team 8 review of records from the State Medical Examiner shows case after case where death was caused by the interaction between Methadone and other drugs.

"I'm extremely frustrated the deaths are not going down, they're rising," Zuppari says. "It seems a lot of these places are not taking it seriously enough."

Interestingly, News Channel 8 was not able to get a pain management doctor to speak on camera for this story. Off the record, Team 8 was told one of the reasons Methadone is so heavily relied on is because it's cheap. And, that insurance companies won't cover the cost of other effective but more expensive drugs used for relief from chronic pain.

