The Dangerous Drug OxyContin

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We're learning more about a dangerous drug that claimed the life of one Ringgold teenager, sent one to the hospital and made two others sick. The Catoosa County Sheriff says the dangers lie in the drug cabinet at home.

Pharmacists here locally say it's so potent it should be taken off their shelves. While it's designed to be used only for terminally ill patients in extreme pain, now it's being used illegally by teenagers... which as we've seen recently can be a fatal mistake.

They may be small, but pharmacists say these pills pack a dangerous punch. Pharmacist Thad Huff says, "People just don't realize how strong of a drug this is and what kind of loaded gun they're dealing with when they take something like OxyContin."

And this loaded gun in the form of drugs is exactly what authorities say killed 16 year old Tim Smith last weekend. Huff says it's a drug designed for terminally ill patients who are suffering extreme pain. He says it releases oxycodone hydrochloride throughout a 12 hour period. "It's one of the strongest narcotics we have in the pharmacy if not the strongest."

Pharmacists say one 80mg pill of OxyContin is equal to 16 of the more common drug Percacet, and Smith didn't just take 1, he took 4. Huff couldn't believe a teenager took that many of this drug. "To hear a teenager take 4 of these is just beyond my imagination, why anybody would think they could take 4 of these and survive it is almost suicidal, so it's obvious that they don't know what they're dealing with or what they have in their possession."

But Smith wasn't the first with these powerful pills in his possession... We dug deeper and found that between 2001 and 2005, there were 58 unintentional deaths from poison in Tennessee, according to the Center for Disease Control. And according to the national average, 75 percent of those deaths were caused by Oxycontin. That's about 44 deaths in 4 years.

Paul Fuchcar is all too familiar with these cases, he works at CADAS, a local drug rehabilitation center. Fuchcar says, "It's a waste of life, just a complete waste of life and it doesn't have to happen."

He says the drug can be very deadly, very quickly, especially for teens who aren't prescribed to the narcotic. "The problem with teenage addiction is that everyone is looking for an escape, and Oxycontin can be an escape for teenagers."

We do know that Smith got the drugs from a friend at school who has been arrested. We did talk with the spokesperson for Purdue Pharma who makes this drug... They told us they've heard of cases like this before and even pulled the 160 mg dosage off the shelf because of the drug's strength and abuse of the pills.

Pharmacists say the best way to fight this problem is to remind parents to keep their medicine cabinets locked. Huff also adds that you should always throw out any unused prescription pills.

The Sheriff's Office says another Ringgold High student, Mitchell Lankford died on February third in a similar situation. He says it was an unrelated incident and an autopsy is being performed.