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Drug poisoning deaths on the rise

By Kathleen Fackelmann, USA TODAY

Poisoning continues to be the second-leading cause of injury deaths in the USA, outstripping deaths caused by firearms for the second year in a row, a federal report says.

For 40 years, deaths caused by car crashes and firearms have topped the list of injury deaths in the USA. Poisoning edged into the No. 2 position in 2004, and the report shows the trend continues for 2005, the latest year for which numbers are available. The report is published in the March Health E-Stats.

Death rates for automobile accidents and firearms did not change much from 1999 to 2005, but the latest analysis shows that the rates for fatal poisonings increased at a dramatic pace and that narcotic drugs are responsible for the majority of the increase.

"When most people think of poisoning, they think of a kid getting under the sink and drinking Drano," says researcher Lois Fingerhut of the National Center for Health Statistics. "That does happen, but it doesn't cause most of the deaths we're talking about now."

A second study, this one published in February, blames one narcotic drug specifically for the lethal trend: methadone, a drug often prescribed to treat chronic pain.

Fingerhut's report shows methadone deaths are up from 786 in 1999 to 4,462 in 2005 for an increase of almost 500%.

The spike in deaths does not appear to be linked to the liquid form of methadone taken by heroin addicts to control cravings, says Leonard Paulozzi of the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control.

Fingerhut's research and other evidence suggests most of the methadone deaths are caused by an overdose of prescription pills.

In the late 1990s, doctors treating patients for pain started to shy away from frequently abused drugs such as OxyContin and turned to methadone pills, Paulozzi says.

But methadone has some properties that make it tricky to prescribe: Its painkilling properties can fade after a few hours, yet the drug can stay in the bloodstream for days, Fingerhut says.

Doctors sometimes prescribe too much methadone, or patients hoping to get more pain relief will take an additional dose. The drug builds up in the bloodstream to a lethal level, and the patient stops breathing, she says.

Robert Lubran of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration says people also take methadone along with other drugs to get high. They can buy methadone from street dealers, or they get prescription pills from a friend, he says.

Fingerhut says there's an urgent need for public education about the dangers of prescription drug overdose — especially those caused by methadone. Drugs can kill easily, she says: "People die at home or on the street."

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