

# HOW TO TAKE

## The opioid epidemic

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Addiction has reared its ugly head once more, as people across the world struggle every day to break free from their chemical dependence on painkillers. According to the National Institute of Drug Abuse, 2.1 million people suffered from opioid abuse in the United States in 2012, a number that has increased in the past five years. Because of this epidemic, doctors face a constant battle: whether or not to relieve their patients' pain and risk opioid addiction.

"We have changed our practice," Barnes-Jewish Hospital trauma and acute care surgeon John Kirby said. "Nowadays, we try to send you home with the smallest amount that we can get away with. If you are having pain, we want to treat your pain appropriately. But, in the effort to try to treat your pain appropriately, we don't want to contribute to the growing problem that people are using too many of these medications."

When opioids enter the body, they travel to the brain where they latch onto receptors, which temporarily decreases pain and produces a feeling of relaxation for the user. As an individual increases his daily dosage of prescription painkillers, such as oxycodone and oxycontin, the desire for the high becomes more prominent and tolerance develops. In an effort to reach the same initial high, a person may take too many opioids and overdose.

"[Opioids] eventually stop your urge to breathe, and then they slow down your heart and drop your blood pressure, which can be very serious," Kirby said. "Emergency responders have more tools like naloxone, which is a drug that immediately blocks all the receptors for the opioid class of drugs. If we can get to [a person who has overdosed] fast enough with the right group of reversal drugs, we can usually reverse the effects."

Accounts of opioid misuse have skyrocketed in the last decade. According to a study done by the Blue Cross Blue Shield Association, the number of people diagnosed with an addiction to opioids increased 493 percent from 2010 to 2016. In 2010, 1.4 out of every 1,000 participants in the study had an opioid disorder while 8.3 out of every 1,000 participants had an opioid disorder in 2016.

"In the course of a day, we might get three or four people who arrive completely unconscious, not breathing, and their heart is beginning to slow down or stop because they unwittingly overdosed on opioids," Kirby

said. "That used to be fairly unusual. It would happen in a week or a month in a big city like Chicago or St. Louis, but now it's a daily occurrence."

The National Council of Alcoholism and Drug Abuse educates teenagers in the St. Louis area about the dangers of prescription drug misuse. According to the NCADA, an adolescent's brain is wired more toward reward than risk. Therefore, many teens do not perceive misusing prescription drugs as harmful as adults do.

"A lot of teenagers think [prescription drugs are] less harmful than a street drug like heroin and cocaine because [they] came from a factory and a doctor prescribed them," NCADA prevention educator Becky Shimony said. "But all these medicines have side effects, especially if they're not needed for medication."

According to Shimony, one in every seven Missouri teenagers feels that there is little to no risk in misusing prescription drugs. Additionally, she said that one in three Missouri teenagers report that it is easy to acquire prescription drugs from family members or friends.

"Eighty percent of heroin users started out misusing prescription drugs," Shimony said. "Most people do not go straight to the heroin. Most people who start misusing prescription drugs started out with a legitimate prescription and just had extra."

Though he never abused prescription medication, physics teacher Richard Witt experienced withdrawal. In July 2012,

Witt got in a bike accident that left him with a broken clavicle, several broken ribs and a punctured lung. Doctors decided that Witt's condition required clavicle surgery and a nerve block near his shoulder.

"At that point, their whole goal was to get my pain down," Witt said. "They restarted the morphine, [and] were giving me the oxycodone every 12 hours, oxycontin every four hours, and norco, which was hydrocodone with Tylenol, every six hours. So they had me on four different opioids to release the pain. It took about 12 hours."

Two days after the surgery, Witt was released from the hospital with small doses of oxycodone and oxycontin. When he tried to wean himself off the painkillers, anticipating the start of school in less than a month, Witt experienced severe withdrawal symptoms.

"If you can imagine your body having no thermostat, it's like you don't even know what your temperature is," Witt said. "I started to get the creepy-crawlies where it feels like ants are underneath your skin. There was anxiety; I'd never experienced anxiety. I couldn't sleep. The worst experience of my life was going through that withdrawal."

Essentially, prescription painkillers are highly addictive. The longer a person consumes them, the harder it becomes to stop.

"This isn't anything that anybody reading a high school newspaper should flirt with," Kirby said. "It is very easy to get addicted to them, and now you've got yourself in a bad problem." ❖

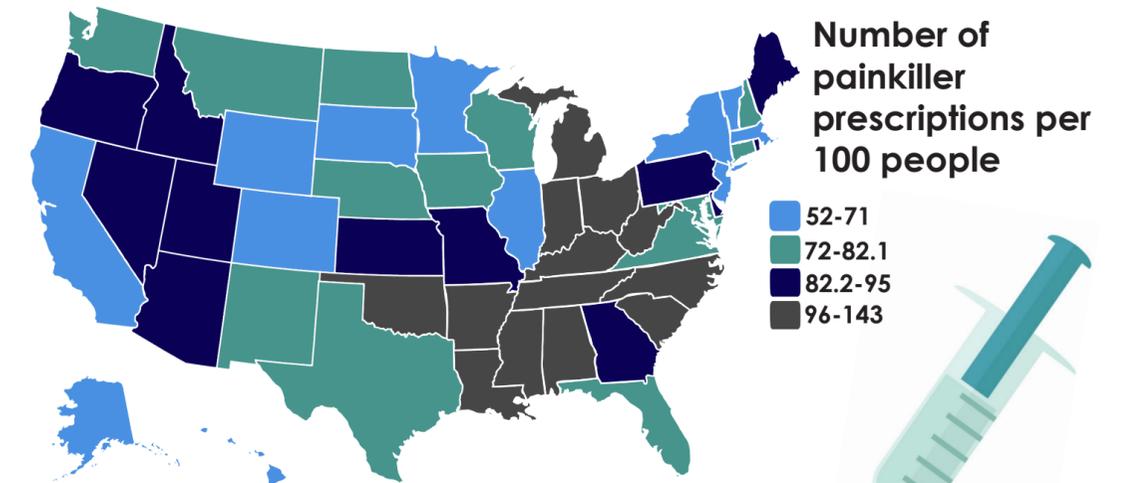
41 percent of students receiving D's or F's misuse prescription drugs compared to 13 percent of students getting A's who misuse them.

1,000 people are treated in emergency departments daily for abusing prescription drugs.

74 percent of adults abusing substances started misusing alcohol or drugs before the age of 17.

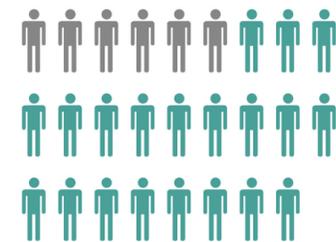
Medical emergencies resulting from prescription drug abuse have increased 132 percent since 2010.

91 Americans die every day from opioid overdose.



1 in 4 people who receive prescription opioids struggle with addiction.

Student Adderall use:

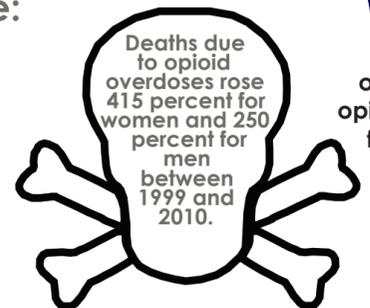


■ High school students (23.53%) ■ College students (76.47%)

People who are addicted to opioid painkillers are 40 times more likely to become addicted to heroin.



The number of prescriptions for opioids has increased from 76 million in 1991 to 207 million in 2013.



Deaths due to opioid overdoses rose 415 percent for women and 250 percent for men between 1999 and 2010.

Sources: CDC, Drugabuse.gov, Newport Academy, Cload.org, Drugabuse.imedpub.com

