

Pharmaceutical drug abuse increasing in India: UN

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Pharmaceutical drug abuse is increasing in South Asia, particularly India - a trend the United Nations says will increase the risk of diseases like HIV/AIDS and also pose a serious challenge to countries already fighting the use of narcotics.

"Many youngsters as young as 18-20 years start using pharmaceutical drugs. Injecting drugs inside the body is very common in India," said Ashita Mittal, senior programme officer in the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNDOC) in South Asia.

"Injecting pharmaceutical drugs is escalating in the region. A survey by us has found that injectable drug users (IDUs) are prone to diseases like HIV/AIDS. Pharmaceutical drug abuse is a double deviation and a dual epidemic," Mittal told IANS.

She said besides India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan too are battling the growing menace of pharmaceutical abuse. June 26 is the International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking.

Pharmaceuticals like buprenorphine, dextropropoxyphene, diazepam, nitrazepam, codeine based cough syrups, phenergan and chlorpheniramine are commonly abused pharmaceuticals in India and neighbouring countries.

"The trend of pharmaceutical abuse is increasing as youngsters think that purchasing them from a chemist's counter is easier, less costly and does not have any stigma attached. There is the perception that by doing so they are not violating the law," Mittal said.

She said though there are laws to regulate pharmaceuticals production and sale, "there is a greater need for monitoring compliance of law".

"Production of spurious drugs, counterfeiting of brand products are proving to be a major worry. It is estimated that over 25 percent medicines consumed in developing states are fake.

"India is a booming pharmaceutical market and we expect drug controllers to strictly monitor spurious drug production and sale, without hampering the genuine pharmaceutical producers," Mittal said.

She said that a fresh UNODC study with a sample size of 5,800 drug users in India has found that over 25 percent are using buprenorphine and 30 percent have injected propoxyphene at least once in their addiction career.

The study also found that at least 28 percent of the drug users have injected heroin at least once in their life and 62 percent are users of pharmaceutical drugs.

According to the UNODC data, nearly 74,000 units of diazepam tablets were seized from drug users in Bangladesh in 2007. Similarly, nearly 95,000 units of norfin, diazepam and phenalgon were seized from Nepal.

"Though India does not have such a systematic data, we can say the situation is much worse in the country than its neighbours. The pharmaceutical abuse in India is a serious and worrisome problem for the country and for UNODC," she added.

Most of IDUs use the same syringes and needles used by their fellow drug users. In north-eastern states, at least 78 percent of the IDUs shared syringes. Twenty-eight percent of the 4,000 IDUs surveyed do not cleanse injection equipment before sharing.

"This heightens the spread of HIV/AIDS. And it's no more restricted to urban cities, small cities in Punjab and Haryana have started facing the problem as well," Mittal said.

According to her, women too are resorting to pharmaceutical drug abuse. While, nearly 16 percent women are using sleeping pills, over 18 percent are using propoxyphene.

She said that to control the problem, "it requires a nationwide awareness campaign, strict vigilance and community involvement".