

Prescription of Pain Killers

Prescription pain killers like OxyContin and Vicodin are currently getting a lot of attention in the US because high profile people like Matthew Perry, Melanie Griffith, Chevy Chase have been treated for addiction to Vicodin and others like Eminem are talking about it. OxyContin is a stronger painkiller that provides a high similar to heroin and is being linked to a number of murders and robberies by those trying to obtain it.

The 1999 Drug Abuse Warning Network in the US, found hospital emergency departments reported a 37 percent increase in the number of times Vicodin was mentioned as a problem between 1997 to 1999. Oxycontin became available in 1996 -- it is a 12 hour time-release version of oxycontin, the active ingredient in older drugs like Perodan and Percocet. Unlike drugs in the hydrocodone (like Vicodin) category, OxyContin doesn't contain acetaminophen which can damage the liver in high doses and limits use. OxyContin allows patients to swallow fewer pills and offers pain relief 3 times stronger than earlier versions. Some are using OxyContin as a substitute for or supplement to street opiates like heroin. Those using the drug to become intoxicated crush the drug and snort or inject it, eliminating the time release feature.

The increase in use of pain killers (not to mention all of the media attention) has probably contributed to a recent general rise in the abuse of painkillers in the US population. The number of Americans reporting first time non-medical use of prescription drugs (which would include painkillers but also stimulants like Ritalin) was much higher in 1998 than 10 years earlier. And while the sale of prescribed drugs overall doubled between 1996 and 2000, the sale of painkillers tripled in the same period.

The most dramatic increase in new users of prescription drugs for nonmedical purposes occurs in 12- to 17-year-olds and 18- to 25-year-olds. In addition, 12- to 14-year-olds reported psychotherapeutics (for example, painkillers or stimulants) as one of two primary drugs used. It also appears that college students' nonmedical use of pain relievers such as Vicodin is on the rise.

Others who may be at particular risk: health care professionals – including physicians, nurses, pharmacists, dentists, anesthesiologists, and veterinarians - because of ease of access, as well as their ability to self-prescribe drugs. Studies suggest that women are more likely than men to use an abusable prescription drug, particularly narcotics and anti-anxiety drugs. Those who have had addiction problems in the past appear to be particularly vulnerable as well.

The general trend may be a "side effect" of an increase in use of painkiller medications to more effectively manage pain than in the past. Increases may also be due to the fact that there is less stigma attached to them due to being obtained from a doctor. Some pharmacies are no longer carrying OxyContin because of a growing pattern of robberies to obtain it. Some have criticized the drug's manufacturer for promoting it too enthusiastically.

The growing problems have prompted the US Food and Drug Administration to review its procedures for approving drugs with high potential for abuse. The producer, Purdue Pharma, has said it would reformulate the drug to make it less appealing to abusers. The recommended treatment for OxyContin is the same as for opiate addiction generally -- either through long term treatment in a therapeutic community or by maintenance therapy with methadone or LAAM.

References:

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Gary Roberts, Senior Associate
Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse
PH: 613-235-4048-225 // 613-829-3152 (home)
FX: 613-235-8101 // 613-829-3307 (home)
EM: groberts@ccsa.ca
WEB: <http://www.ccsa.ca>