

Curated News Brief for Nurse.com, ghostwritten for Nursing Editor
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Painkiller use exceeds tobacco use

The number of patients using painkillers in the U.S. hit 38%, which is even higher than the 31% of Americans who use tobacco, the Washington Post reported.

“Those numbers are so high partly because Americans have developed a voracious appetite for painkillers in recent years,” Christopher Ingraham wrote in the Sept. 20 article published online. “A 2008 study estimated that Americans consume about 80% of the global opioid supply and 99% of the supply of hydrocodone, one of the most popular prescription painkillers.”

The Washington Post article referred to a Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration report which stated that “in 2015, an estimated 119.0 million Americans aged 12 or older used prescription psychotherapeutic drugs in the past year, representing 44.5% of the population. About 97.5 million people used pain relievers (36.4%), 39.3 million used tranquilizers (14.7%), 17.2 million used stimulants (6.4%), and 18.6 million used sedatives (6.9%).”

Those statistics are for people who received prescriptions from their doctors. As for misuse of painkillers, researchers wrote that “in 2015, 18.9 million people aged 12 or older (7.1%) misused prescription psychotherapeutic drugs in the past year.”

“This number included 12.5 million people who misused pain relievers in the past year (4.7%), 6.1 million who misused tranquilizers (2.3%), 5.3 million who misused stimulants (2.0%), and 1.5 million who misused sedatives (0.6%),” they stated in the report.

Ingraham’s article noted how [many patients are afflicted with chronic pain](#), so proper management with prescription medicine can help them function. However, as with any opioid painkillers, there are risks involved with higher doses, addiction and combining drugs and alcohol.

“In 2014, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, opioid painkillers killed nearly 19,000 Americans,” Ingraham wrote. “That’s greater than the total number of Americans (15,809) who were murdered that year.”

The NIH National Institute on Drug Abuse estimated that 1.9 million Americans suffered from substance abuse disorders in 2014, according to a January 2016 article when drug policy officials and advocates addressed Congress about the opioid epidemic.

To curb the epidemic, the [NIH](#) recommended the following:

“Educational initiatives delivered in school and community settings (primary prevention); supporting consistent use of prescription drug monitoring programs; implementation of overdose education and naloxone distribution programs to issue naloxone directly to opioid users and potential bystanders; aggressive law enforcement efforts to address doctor shopping and pill mills; diverting justice-involved individuals with substance use disorders to drug courts with mandated engagement in treatment; expansion of access to MAT; and abuse-deterrent formulations for opioid analgesics.”

In March 2016, the [CDC released guidelines](#) to improve the way opioids are prescribed and to ensure patients have access to safer treatments while reducing misuse, abuse or overdose.

