

THE DANGERS OF PRESCRIPTION OPIOID MEDICATION ABUSE

Three out of every four injured workers are currently prescribed opioids, according to the Workers' Compensation Research Institute (WCRI). Unfortunately, as many as 35% of patients with chronic pain have become addicted to their pain medication, according to the Journal of Addictive Diseases.

The dangers of opioid abuse and addiction

Tom Phelan, President and CEO of Chesapeake Employers' Insurance, explains: "Many injured workers are prescribed opioid painkillers to help with the pain they suffer after a serious injury. The problem occurs when some of these injured workers get addicted to these drugs.

"Opioid addiction prevents workers from returning to gainful employment and adversely affects families and finances, and potentially harms children who find and use opioid medications meant for someone else. Furthermore, opioid addiction can lead to heroin use."

According to the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DHMH), as it has become more difficult and expensive for patients to obtain prescription opiates,

people have switched to cheaper and more accessible heroin. Opiate addiction can lead to accidental death as a result of an overdose of either the opiate painkiller or the heroin used as a substitute.

Modern opioid pain medications chemically similar to heroin

Opioids are a group of powerful drugs that are used for treating pain. They include the prescription pain relievers codeine, oxycodone, hydrocodone, hydromorphone and fentanyl.

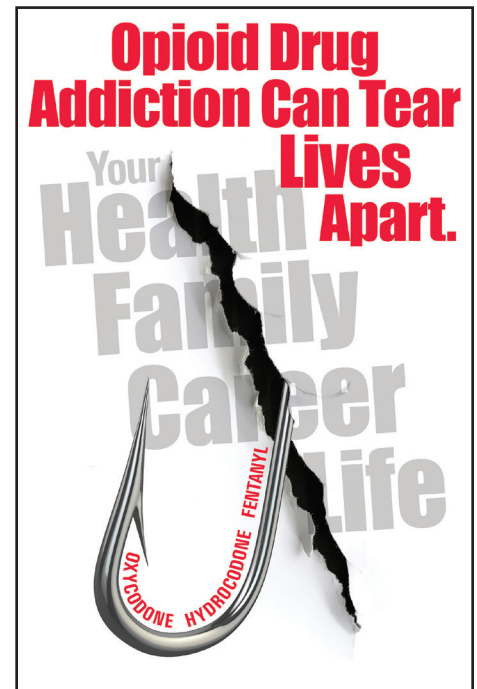
Stephen Fisher, M.D., Ph.D., Medical Advisor to Chesapeake Employers' Insurance, explained that many of the opiates prescribed to injured workers for pain actually fall into the same class of compounds as heroin and morphine.

"There's a misconception out there that pharmaceutical opioids are drastically different and less addictive than heroin," says Dr. Fisher. "But the reality is that the two are chemically similar. The only difference is that one is illegal and the other is made legally in a lab, but they have similar effects on the brain."

Opioids interact with nerve cell receptors in the brain and nervous system to produce pleasurable effects and relieve pain. However, the prescription opiates can have a much greater "morphine equivalent dose" than their illicit counterparts – which means they are often a lot stronger and, therefore, more dangerous.

Dangerous side effects include addiction, accidental overdose, death

Opioids can slow down the heart rate and breathing, causing a person to feel drowsy. Sometimes, a person may begin to feel like he or she needs more medication to get relief from the pain. Long-term use of opioid pain medication can lead to physical dependence and addiction. Dependence can lead to the need for higher doses of the drug, and a high dose of opiates can cause death from cardiac or respiratory arrest.



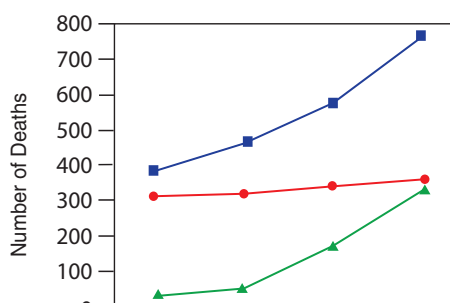
Robin Iachini, M.S.N., R.N., Health Services Manager for Chesapeake Employers' Insurance, adds that opioids don't always help with chronic pain. "The narcotic medications are not helping our injured workers get back to work," says Robin. "The pain medications that are meant to improve outcomes for injured workers are actually leading to increased disability and medical costs in many cases.

"There are other ways to treat pain, including the use of non-narcotic pain medication, and injured workers should pursue these alternatives with their treating physicians," she added.



Number of Opioid-related Deaths in Maryland by Substance, 2012-2015

Source: MD Dept. of Health & Mental Hygiene



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