Dynamics and Demographics of Opiate Addiction Are Shifting

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The demographics of U.S. opiate addicts are evolving, as are the types of opiates—pills, heroin or a combination of the two—commonly used. Publishing their findings in Addictive Behaviors, researchers analyzed data from the 2010 to 2013 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, which included responses from 9,516 individuals who reported only using prescription painkillers, 506 who said they combined heroin with opiate pills, and 179 who reported only taking heroin.

Heroin addiction can transmit hepatitis C virus (HCV) and HIV through the sharing of contaminated needles or other injection equipment. The recent outbreak of the two viruses in a rural area of Indiana resulted from this mode of transmission.

The epidemic of opiate painkillers in the United States has spawned a resurgence of heroin use, as efforts to crack down on painkiller abuse have limited their availability and prevented the easy crushing of pills in order achieve a faster high. Consequently, many opiate addicts have sought a more readily available, as well as cheaper, alternative in heroin.

According to this new research, heroin use may still be relatively rare, but it is on the rise. Additionally, many heroin users are combining the drug with opiate painkillers, with a dramatic increase among white users, particularly young white men. The number of people using both types of opiates is rising at a faster rate than that of people abusing painkillers alone.

Classically, heroin use has been a particular problem among black, poor and urban areas. Meanwhile, the rates of heroin use as well as combined heroin-painkiller use are rising among individuals who are white, employed and living in rural and small urban areas.

To read the study abstract, click here.

To read a press release about the study, click here.

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