Opioid Use Disorder Treatment on the Rise—Except in Youth

Researchers analyzed rates of use of buprenorphine, which is used to treat opioid use disorder, between 2009 and 2018.

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Rates of use of buprenorphine, a treatment for opioid use disorder (OUD), have risen over the past decade for all age groups except teens and young adults.

Along with methadone and naltrexone, buprenorphine is what's known as a medication-assisted treatment and is scientifically proven to reduce cravings for opioids and reduce the risk of relapse and overdose. Addiction experts regard buprenorphine as holding the greatest potential for expanding access to OUD treatment as the opioid crisis continues to grip the nation, driving up overdose deaths.

Publishing their findings in a letter in JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association, a research team analyzed prescription data on buprenorphine use by individuals 15 to 80 years old according to the IQVIA Real World Data: Longitudinal Prescription (IQVIA LRx) database. They analyzed the period spanning 2009 to 2018.

The database includes information on prescriptions from retail and nonretail pharmacies. The proportion of the U.S. population that was covered by the database increased from 76.5% in 2009 to 92.0% in 2018. The analysis factored in this shift in order to arrive at the estimates of buprenorphine use rates.

The annual rate of prescriptions for buprenorphine per 1,000 people increased from 1.97 prescriptions in 2009 (when there were 352,000 actual prescriptions) to 4.43 prescriptions in 2018 (1,038,000 prescriptions).

During the study period, the prescription rate per 1,000 people increased from 2.41 to 8.34 prescriptions among those 35 to 44 years old while decreasing from 1.76 to 1.40 prescriptions among those 15 to 24 years old. At the same time, the corresponding rate increased from 2.44 to 5.21 prescriptions among boys and men and from 1.49 to 3.66 prescriptions among girls and women.

"While it's encouraging to see an overall increase in prescription rates for buprenorphine, the data

suggest that the youngest group is having difficulty accessing this potentially lifesaving treatment," the study's leader Mark Olfson, MD, MPH, a professor of psychiatry, medicine and law at the Columbia University Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons, said in a press release. "These findings for young people are particularly worrisome, given that their decrease in buprenorphine treatment occurred during a period when there was an increase in opioid-related overdose deaths for this age group," says Olfson.

Overall, 29.3% of buprenorphine prescriptions continued for at least 180 days, including 28.6% of those provided to boys and men and 30.2% provided to girls and women.

"Our results highlight the critical need to improve buprenorphine treatment services, especially for the youngest with opioid use disorder," Olfson said.

To read the abstract of the letter, click here.

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

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