Severe Opioid Poisoning Is Up Among Children, Adolescents

Teenagers are attempting suicide with opioids at increasing rates.

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While the number of opioid poisoning cases among children and adolescents is declining, greater use of opioids such as heroin, fentanyl and methadone is leading to a higher rate of severe and life-threatening poisonings in recent years, MedPage Today reports.

Megan Land, MD, of Emory University in Atlanta, led a retrospective analysis of more than 750,000 opioid poisoning cases reported to the National Poison Data System from 2005 to 2018. Nearly 210,000 of them, or 28%, were among children and adolescents 18 years old and younger, Land reported in a presentation at the Society of Critical Care Medicine.

Between 2015 and 2018, close to 1 in 10 children and adolescents who experienced an opioid overdose were admitted to a critical care unit, and more than one in five of the pediatric overdoses were driven by an attempted suicide, in particular among teenagers.

Admissions to critical care units increased across the study period, involving 6.6% of the pediatric opioid poisoning cases during 2005 to 2009, 8.5% during 2010 to 2014 and 9.6% during 2015 to 2018. Across the study period, 0.21% of the children and adolescents who experienced opioid poisonings died, including 0.18%, 0.20% and 0.28% in each of the three periods, respectively. Suicidal intent as a cause of the poisoning increased from 13.9%, to 15.3% and 21.2% during each of the three periods, respectively.

About half of the poisonings were among children who had ingested opioids accidentally, while the other half were among adolescents who used the drugs intentionally. Across all age ranges, the poisonings were most common among toddlers 4 years old and younger and 15- to 18-year-olds.

Recent public health campaigns about the dangers of opioid use do seem to have reduced the use of typical opioid painkiller pills among youth. This includes pills such as oxycodone, codeine and tramadol, which are commonly found in medicine cabinets are involved in the lion’s share of pediatric poisoning cases.

Unfortunately, even as such painkiller use has declined, the use of the more dangerous opioids has risen among minors, with heroin, fentanyl and methadone pushing up rates of severe and life-

threatening poisonings in this population in recent years.

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