Survivors of Opioid Overdoses Have Very High Risk of Death Within One Year

Compared with the general population, they have much higher rates of death as a result of HIV, viral hepatitis and other causes during this time.

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People who experience a nonfatal overdose on opioid drugs have an extraordinarily high risk of death within one year.

“These findings underscore the overall medical frailty of this patient population and show us that instead of just focusing on [overdose] survivors’ drug use, we need to coordinate addiction treatment for survivors with general medical and mental health care,”Mark Olfson, MD, MPH, the study’s leader and a professor of psychiatry and epidemiology at Columbia University’s Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons, said in a press release.

Publishing their findings in JAMA Psychiatry, Olfson and his colleagues studied Medicaid records on a cohort of 76,325 people 18 to 64 years old who experienced a nonfatal opioid overdose between 2001 and 2007. The researchers looked for death records for the cohort members in the National Death Index.

The study had on hand a cumulative 66,736 years of Medicaid data on the study cohort.

During their first year after experiencing a nonfatal opioid overdose, 5,194 members of the overall cohort died, including 49 who died of viral hepatitis and 179 who died of HIV-related causes. This translated to an overall death rate of 778 per 10,000 cumulative years of follow-up, or 7.8 percent. That rate was 24 times higher than would be expected based on general population trends.

The most common causes of death include substance use–associated disease (26 percent of the total), circulatory diseases (13 percent) and cancer (10 percent).

Compared with the expected death rate in the general population, death rates for all causes were higher among the study cohort, in particular drug use–associated diseases (132-fold higher death rate), HIV (46-fold higher), chronic respiratory diseases (41-fold higher), viral hepatitis (31-fold higher) and suicide (26-fold higher). For females, the suicide-related death rate was 48-fold higher

than would be expected in the general population.

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

To read the study abstract, click here.

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