



News Release

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Opioid epidemic continues in Washington

Progress in preventing deaths from prescription narcotics compromised by rising heroin fatalities

OLYMPIA -- New Washington health data shows a significant drop in deaths from prescription narcotics in recent years. Tragically, the decline is offset by a doubling of the number of heroin deaths in our state during the same time. Both heroin and prescription narcotics are types of drugs known as opioids.

Data from 2014 state vital statistics records show the number of deaths from prescription narcotics has steadily dropped from a peak of 512 deaths in 2008 to 319 in 2014. At the same time, heroin killed 293 people in Washington last year, about twice as many as in 2008. Overall, the number of deaths from opioid overdose in Washington remains at about 600 a year.

“Across our state, we are seeing the terrible effects of heroin and prescription narcotics on our families, friends and communities,” said Governor Jay Inslee. “Although more must be done, we’ve made significant progress in reducing overprescribing of opioids, and with health care reform, a record number of families who just a few years ago had no medical coverage and limited means to regain their health, can now seek treatment for substance use disorders.”

Washington was one of the first states to recognize and respond to the national epidemic of deaths due to prescription narcotic overdoses. The decline in these deaths in Washington is likely in part due to [groundbreaking prescribing guidelines](#) originally developed in 2007 and updated this year.

State health agencies recently convened a group of health care providers, public health officials,

and substance abuse experts to develop a statewide response plan to address the opioid epidemic. The group expects to complete the plan in the next few months.

The state has set aside \$6 million in new funding to treat opioid addiction, including medication-assisted treatment. Washington will also receive \$3 million in federal funding to provide treatment services over the next three years. In addition, tax funding from retail marijuana sales will support an expansion in adolescent treatment and community-based prevention services.

Deaths from prescription narcotics are highest in the 45- to 54-year-old age group. In comparison, 25- to 34-year-olds have the highest heroin death rate. The largest increase in heroin overdose deaths from 2004 to 2014 occurred in the 15- to 34-year-old age group.

Many heroin users first misuse prescription narcotics such as hydrocodone and oxycodone; the switch to heroin likely occurs because heroin is cheaper and easier to get.

“The link between heroin and abuse of prescription narcotics is one more reason to prevent overprescribing,” said Dr. Gary Franklin, Medical Director, Washington State Department of Labor & Industries. “These are powerful drugs that should be prescribed cautiously, using the lowest dose for the shortest amount of time necessary.”

State officials say the solution lies with informing both patients and providers about how to safely prescribe and use prescription narcotics.

The state has a webpage called TakeAsDirected with information for pain patients about [how to take these powerful medications safely](#), including how to reduce the risk of addiction. People who need treatment for addiction to heroin or prescription pain medications can get free and confidential help by calling the Washington Recovery Help Line at 1-866-789-1511.

Parents and caregivers can help prevent opioid misuse by safely storing prescription medication and properly [disposing](#) of medications. Parents should also [talk with children](#) about the life-threatening risks of taking medications that are not prescribed for them.

There’s also a potentially lifesaving drug, called naloxone, that can reverse an overdose from heroin or prescription opioids. It comes in a kit that is available in [many parts of Washington](#) and

can be ordered through pharmacies. The University of Washington has information about how to prevent and reverse an overdose at their [StopOverdose website](#).

“Health professionals can help by making naloxone kits available to patients, and by learning how to identify prescription drug misuse at the [TakeAsDirected](#) website,” said Chris Imhoff, Division of Behavioral Health and Recovery Director, Washington State Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS).

The [Department of Health website](#) (doh.wa.gov) is your source for *a healthy dose of information*. Also, [find us on Facebook](#) and [follow us on Twitter](#).

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