



## Unintentional Poisoning Deaths on the Rise

Poisoning routinely appears as one of the top causes of unintentional deaths in the United States, and recently has become the fastest-rising cause of accidental death, according to the National Safety Council. In 2004, 20,950 unintentional poisoning deaths were reported; in 1993, there were fewer than 9,000.

New data indicates the danger lurks not in a bleach bottle under the sink, but in a prescription bottle inside the medicine cabinet.

### Drugs of Choice

Nearly all U.S. poisoning deaths are attributed to drugs, mostly the abuse of prescription and illegal drugs, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said. Between 1992 and 2004, unintentional deaths attributed to "drugs, medicaments or biologicals" about tripled, with narcotics and hallucinogens accounting for nearly half, data from the National Safety Council shows.

Narcotics and hallucinogens, which include opioid analgesics such as oxycodone and illegal substances such as cocaine, are the leading causes of unintentional drug deaths, accounting for 9,798 in 2004, the National Safety Council said. This figure is a steep jump from just five years before, when 6,009 deaths were attributed to these drugs. Deaths from psychotherapeutic drugs, such as sedatives or antidepressants, nearly doubled between 1999 and 2004 – from 61 to 1,300, according to the council.

### Unaware of the Danger

Shockingly, the danger of prescription drugs is going largely unnoticed by the average American adult. A telephone survey from the National Safety Council in August showed more than half of people polled (53.2 percent) believed household chemicals were most commonly involved in fatal poisonings, while 33.9 percent believed drugs and medicines were the most common cause. In fact, drugs and medicines account for more than 90 percent of all unintentional deaths, while gases, vapors, organic solvents and other unspecified chemicals make up less than 4 percent, the National Safety Council said.

Another misconception: The vast majority of people (80.7 percent) believed children face the greatest risk of death by poisoning. However, data indicates children are in fact one of the lowest-risk groups. Only 86 unintentional poisoning deaths occurred among children 14 years old and younger in 2004, but adults 25 to 64 years old saw 17,695 such deaths, according to the council.

Likewise, the death rate shows a large gap between the young and old. Per 100,000 people, there were:

- 0.2 deaths among children 4 and younger
- 0.1 deaths among 5- to 14-year-olds
- 3.1 deaths among 15- to 19-year-olds
- 7.7 deaths among 20- to 24-year-olds
- 12 deaths among 25- to 44-year-olds
- 10.8 deaths among 45- to 64-year-olds
- 2.5 deaths among people 65 and older

While men saw the largest increase in overdoses in the last decade, with 6,000, women saw the quickest growing rate – up more than 300 percent in the same time frame, according to the National



Safety Council. This is likely due to women being 48 percent more likely to be prescribed a narcotic or other potentially abusable drug, the New York-based National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University said.

### **Prevention and Treatment**

Part of the responsibility for avoiding unintentional poisoning belongs not just to the doctor or pharmacist, but the patient as well, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse. Patients taking prescription drugs should:

- Always follow the prescribed directions.
- Be aware of drug interactions.
- Never stop or change a dosing regimen without discussing it with a health care provider.
- Never use another person's prescription.
- Provide a full description of any complaint before receiving other medications.

Addiction to any drug is considered a brain disease, NIDA said. For treatment to be successful, the type of drug and the needs of the individual must be taken into account. Several treatment methods – including detoxification and pharmacological therapies – may be used, according to the institute.

Behavioral treatment, when delivered effectively, also can be successful in treating drug addiction. This treatment focuses on teaching patients how to function without drugs, to avoid situations that could lead to drug use and how to handle a relapse.

Likewise, treatment with medications helps relieve feelings of withdrawal and can curb drug cravings. In the cases of opioids, research has shown a combination of pharmacological and behavioral treatments is the most effective in treating addiction, according to NIDA.

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