

Daily Union Article

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Title: Opioid Epidemic: A Bigger Problem than You Know

Perhaps you have heard that the United States is facing a growing epidemic related to drug overdoses. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reports that more than three out of five drug overdose deaths involve an opioid. Opioids are substances that work on the nervous system in the body or specific receptors in the brain to reduce the intensity of pain. Opioids are a class of drugs that include powerful prescription pain relievers and the illegal drug heroin.

Overdose deaths from opioids, including prescription opioids and heroin, have increased by more than five times since 1999. Overdoses involving opioids killed more than 42,000 people in 2016 and 40% of those deaths were from prescription opioids. Collectively from 1999-2016, more than 350,000 people died from an overdose involving any opioid, including prescription and illicit opioids.

Illicit drugs are substances that either stimulate or inhibit the central nervous system or cause hallucinogenic effects to the point that they have been prohibited by law for sale or use. These drugs include: amphetamine-type stimulants, marijuana/cannabis, cocaine, heroin and other opioids, synthetic drugs and MDMA (ecstasy.) They represent the largest volume of criminal cases that are examined by forensic science laboratories according to Dr. Max Houck, FRSC and Dr. Jay Siegel in *Fundamentals of Forensic Science (3rd Edition), 2015*.

You may be wondering why it is important for the average U.S. citizen to know about such things as the opioid epidemic. The highly addictive nature of these drugs, coupled with the escalating overdose rate has a significant impact on not just the user or addict, but the families and relationships they are part of. In one study, it was found that as many as 1 in 4 people receiving prescription opioids long term in a primary care setting struggles with addiction.

Prescription opioids can be legally prescribed by medical professionals to treat moderate to severe pain. This pain could be caused by a variety of reasons: injury, surgery, or even illnesses such as cancer. Some of the commonly prescribed opioids include oxycodone, hydrocodone, and morphine. These medications, while effective for the treatment of pain, are often misused. It is estimated that 30% of individuals who are prescribed opioids for chronic pain misuse them.

To avoid opioid misuse and overdose:

- Do not take more medication than what is prescribed.
- Do not take other people's prescriptions.
- Do not mix opioids with alcohol, antianxiety medications, muscle relaxants, sleep aids, and other opioids.
- Be proactive in addressing pain. Experts suggest exploring various methods of alleviating pain, such as over-the-counter pain medications, exercise, or alternative therapies.

There are effective treatment options for opioid dependence, yet only 10 percent of people who need such treatment are receiving it. Addiction can affect anyone regardless of ethnicity, race, socio-economic status, employment status, and location of resident or any other variable. If you or someone in your family or social circle is misusing prescription or illicit drugs, encourage them to seek out help.

WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) offers online and over the phone assistance 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Go to findtreatment.samhsa.gov or call 1-800-662-4357. This hotline is a confidential, free source of information (in English and Spanish) for individuals and family members facing mental and/or substance use disorders. This service provides referrals to local treatment facilities, support groups, and community-based organizations.

If you have left over medication in your home it is important that you dispose of it properly. We are approaching the National Prescription Drug Take Back Day – April 28, 2018. The purpose of this National effort is to provide residents with a safe, convenient and responsible means of disposing prescription medication.

By moving these unused meds out of the medicine cabinet, you are following reducing the risk you take that the medications will be taken incorrectly or taken by other family members they were not intended for. You can find a local drop-off location near you by visiting the National Drug Enforcement Administration website at:

https://www.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/drug_disposal/takeback/

For Junction City, the local police department at 210 E. 9th Street will be accepting drop-offs on April 28 from 10am – 2pm in their lobby area. Take the time clean out the cabinet and keep your family safe from the effects of misusing prescription medications.

If you are still taking these prescription medications, store them in a secure place, out of the reach of children and others. Review the prescription directions carefully and make sure you know how much, how often, and how to take the medication. Read through the drug information materials the pharmacy sends home with you. It is important to know the potential risks and side effects of any medication you take. Finally, never share or sell prescription opioids and never use another person's prescription opioids – both actions are illegal.

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For more information about the opioid epidemic and related resources, contact me at the Geary County K-State Research and Extension office at 785-238-4161. We have a fact sheet from K-State that can help guide you through the challenges and opportunities for combating this serious health issue. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!