U.S. Prescription Opioid Use Rates Have Stabilized

Experts are not certain what this latest trend signifies for the trajectory of the opioid use disorder epidemic, however.

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The proportion of U.S. adults who used prescription opioids has stabilized over the past decade or so, MedPage Today reports.

The excessive prescribing of opioid pills that took off during the 1990s has helped fuel an epidemic of opioid use disorder in the United States, with many individuals who began taking pills such as OxyContin (oxycodone) migrating to injectable heroin. More recently, nonprescription use of fentanyl has soared, driving up overdose rates.

Sharing injection drug use equipment can transmit hepatitis B virus (HBV), hepatitis C virus (HCV) and HIV.

Steven Frenk, PhD, PMP, of the National Health Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and colleagues analyzed data on prescription opioid use among U.S. residents age 20 and older according to the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES). They published their findings in NCHS Health E-Stats.

During 2013 to 2016, 6.5% of adults reported using prescription opioids during the previous month, compared with 6.9% during 2003 to 2016. The difference between these two rates was not statistically significant, meaning it could have occurred by chance.

Opioid use rates increased with age: 3.2% of younger adults ,7.5% of middle age adults and 9.6% of those age 60 and older took opioids during the past month.

The stabilization of prescription opioid use has not coincided with a similar trend among opioid-related overdoses, which have risen dramatically in recent years. The discrepancy is a product of the fact that overdoses are largely driven by the use of illegal opioids such as heroin and non-prescription use of fentanyl.

During 2013 to 2016, 7.6% of women and 5.3% of men reported recent prescription opioid use. After adjusting the data to account for age differences between the cohort members, the study

authors found that the opioid use rate was highest among whites (6.6% reported recent use) and Blacks (6.7%) compared with Latinos (5.3%) and Asians (2.0%).

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