

Health Risks of Opioid Use

Opioids are a group of drugs that are prescribed by doctors to treat pain. The drugs Demerol and OxyContin are two examples of opioids that your doctor might prescribe. Some opioids are also illegal drugs, such as heroin. People who use opioids in an unprescribed way --or *abuse* them --are at risk for many health problems, especially if they inject the drugs.

Health Problems

People who abuse opioids can catch several dangerous diseases. Some of these diseases can be spread by dirty needles. Dirty needles are needles that have been used before, by someone else. Other diseases can be spread by having unprotected sex (in other words, not using a condom).

HIV	Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) weakens the immune system, making it more likely for people to get other diseases. HIV can be spread by using dirty needles, by having unprotected sex, or can be passed from mother to child during pregnancy. In its final stage, HIV turns into AIDS and leads to painful and deadly infections or cancer. Some medicines can make it easier to live with AIDS, but there is no cure.
Hepatitis C	Hepatitis C is a disease that attacks the liver. It can be spread by using dirty needles, by having unprotected sex, or by getting a tattoo with a dirty needle. Symptoms of hepatitis C include tiredness, stomach pain, nausea, and yellowed skin (jaundice). However, many people who catch hepatitis C never have any symptoms. Hepatitis C can also cause deadly liver damage.
Hepatitis B	Hepatitis B is like hepatitis C in several ways. Both diseases harm the liver and both are spread in the same ways. Many of the symptoms are the same, and both diseases can result in deadly liver damage. Unlike hepatitis C, pregnant women can easily pass hepatitis B to their unborn children during pregnancy. Also unlike hepatitis C, there is a vaccine available to prevent people from getting hepatitis B.
Tuberculosis	Tuberculosis is an infection of the lungs that can cause death. Tuberculosis is spread by close contact with someone who has the disease. It is especially common in people with weak immune systems, like people with AIDS. Symptoms of tuberculosis include fever, tiredness, trouble breathing, coughing, coughing up blood, and chest pain. Tuberculosis can be treated with antibiotics.
Skin infections	Painful, pus-filled sores are common among people who inject drugs. These infections are usually found at injection sites on the body (where the needle enters the skin) -most often the arms, legs, or feet.

These infectious diseases can be spread to people who do not use drugs. For example, a heroin addict who becomes infected with HIV when using a dirty needle may infect his/her partner with the disease by having unprotected sex.

Conclusion

As you have learned, people who abuse opioids are at higher risk for a number of diseases. Since diseases can be spread, drug abusers also put their loved ones at risk. The best solution is to not use drugs!

If you or someone you know is abusing opioids or other drugs, talk to your doctor about it. Or, you can contact a substance abuse treatment center in your area for help or more information. Call 1-800-662-HELP or visit the website <http://www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov/> to use the federal government's substance abuse treatment locator service.