

Prescription painkiller overdoses reach new heights

BY SHARON MCBRAYER Staff Writer | Posted: Sunday, April 19, 2015 12:00 am

National health officials say the country is in the midst of a prescription painkiller overdose epidemic.

The problem has become so prevalent the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has a dedicated section on its website for prescription drug overdose.

The CDC says the number of overdose deaths of prescription painkillers skyrocketed in the last decade.

“Since 1999, the amount of prescription painkillers prescribed and sold in the U.S. has nearly quadrupled, yet there has not been an overall change in the amount of pain that Americans report,” the CDC says.

The CDC says 44 people in the U.S. die from overdose of prescription painkillers every day, and many more become addicted.

Burke County numbers

Burke County has seen an increase in prescription overdoses.

The number of overdose calls for EMS response in Burke County also increased between 2010 and 2014.

Burke County EMS Maj. Jason Black said the agency responded to 172 overdose calls in 2010. By 2014, the number had increased to 210, he said.

The number of psychiatric emergencies county EMS has responded to has shot up from 249 in 2010 to 447 in 2014, according to Black. Prescription opioid pain medications include drugs such as oxycodone, hydrocodone and methadone, according to information from the state.

Black said some of those psychiatric calls were probably drug intoxications. However, it isn't possible for a paramedic to determine 100 percent of the time if the patient is having a psychotic episode or a drug intoxication. Blood testing at the hospital helps determine whether it is related to drug intoxication, he said.

The increase of psychiatric calls to EMS may be attributed to the downsizing of the facilities that provide mental health services, Black said.

Overdose deaths from prescription pain killers now exceed both heroin and cocaine overdose deaths, with the increase over the two illicit drugs starting around 2000, according to information from the North Carolina Injury & Violence Prevention branch of state Division of Public Health.

In a 2013 study entitled “Unintentional Poisonings in North Carolina,” 10,952 state residents have died from unintentional poisonings since 1999. Poisoning is the second leading cause of unintentional death since 1999 in the state, according to the study.

During the three years between 2010 and 2012, Burke County was one of 32 counties in the state that had unintentional poisoning rates significantly higher than the average state rate, according to the study.

In the ER

Dr. Seth Hawkins works in the emergency room of Carolinas HealthCare System Blue Ridge. He said prescription overdose deaths have surpassed motor vehicle deaths as the No. 1 cause of death.

Hawkins, who has been at Blue Ridge since 2003, said the emergency department treats patients’ pain using the tools they have, one of which is prescription pain medication. He said prescription pain drugs are safe when they are taken as prescribed.

When someone comes into the emergency room with pain, he said there is a lot of thought that goes into prescribing pain medication. Doctors and emergency room workers ask a series of questions to find out about a patient’s pain, he said.

However, it’s very common to see overdoses in the emergency room, he said.

“People don’t know how dangerous these medications are,” Hawkins said.

In addition to the opioids in prescription pain medicine, many also include Tylenol, Hawkins said. A danger is the longer someone uses those medications, they could start building a tolerance for them and, therefore, take more. Not only could that increase the chance of overdosing, but the Tylenol could do major damage to the person’s liver over time, he said.

Help

Hawkins said for the last 10 years, Blue Ridge has been working on pain management strategies and it has a pain clinic. Pain is an emergency and the health care system is trying to find multiple ways of treating pain in a safe way, he said.

In answer to the prescription painkiller overdoses, a North Carolina Senate Bill 20 was approved in 2013 to give limited immunity to folks who seek help for someone overdosing. The bill, which also was referred to as the Good Samaritan Law/Naloxone Access, gives immunity to a doctor who prescribes an opiate antagonist (antidote) and gives immunity to a person who administers it to someone they believe is in the midst of a drug overdose.

An opiate antagonist is a drug that counteracts an overdose and can be administered either as a nasal spray or an injection. If it is administered to someone not using an opiate it doesn't have any effect on the person, say officials.

The antidote works on the receptor sites in the body so the opiate can't attach itself. The antidote will push the opiate off the receptor site, health officials say.

Overdose Prevention Project, which is a program of the North Carolina Harm Reduction Coalition, became operational Aug. 1, 2013, according to its website. As of April 2, the organization has dispensed more than 8,885 overdose rescue kits that include naloxone and has received 401 confirmed reports the medication was administered successfully by lay people, according to the organization.

According to the North Carolina Harm Reduction Coalition, the Good Samaritan Law gives limited immunity from prosecution to a victim or witness of an overdose for small amounts of most drugs and paraphernalia that may be found as a result of calling for help. The immunity also applies to underage drinkers who seek help for alcohol poisoning, the coalition says. However, only the caller is immune but has to give their real name and stay with the victim, according to the coalition.

The opiate antagonist is something EMS workers have used for decades when responding to overdose calls.

Senate Bill 20 was born from a pilot program in Wilkes County called Project Lazarus.

Wilkes County had such a huge problem with prescription painkiller overdoses that it became No. 1 in the state for it. In 2007, Wilkes County had the third-highest drug overdose death rate in the nation, according to the CDC, says the Project Lazarus website.

Naloxone is a prescription medication, which is covered under Medicaid, Medicare and most health insurances, according to information from Project Lazarus. Folks can get a prescription for it from their doctor, the information says.

Project Lazarus provides naloxone free through a pharmacy in North Wilkesboro.

Can Burke County do anything?

Project Lazarus says what worked in Wilkes County to combat overdose deaths from prescription medication can work in other counties.

One of the things Project Lazarus suggests for communities is to organize and activate through holding town hall meetings, forming task forces, have community-based leadership, coalition building and assembling "managing chronic pain" toolkit.

It also suggests a drug detox program and opening a satellite office drug treatment clinic, as well as drug user education on overdose prevention and response.

Project Lazarus suggest educating the public through things such as school-based education on prescription pain medication and pledge cards, campaigns warning people not to share medications on their prescription packages, billboards warning against sharing medications and presentations at civic organizations, churches, colleges and community forums.

An overdose prevention program is located in Marion through the North Carolina Harm Reduction Coalition, according to Project Lazarus. It says various harm reduction services are offered, including overdose prevention training and naloxone. It says services are mobile so folks should contact them directly to confirm times and locations.

The same program exists in Asheville and a contact number on the organization's website says people can call 336-543-8050.

McBrayer, Sharon. "Prescription painkiller overdoses reach new heights." *THE NEWS HERALD* 19 April 2015. Web.