



Painkiller deaths drop in US for the first time since 1999

But heroin takes more lives, federal data show

By Donna Leger

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New federal data show deaths from prescription painkillers decreased for the first time since 1999, while heroin deaths surged, suggesting some addicts may have turned to illicit drugs as new federal and state restrictions made prescription narcotics harder to get. Abuse of prescription opioids, such as the powerful painkiller OxyContin, fueled a surge in overdose deaths, which quadrupled from 4,030 deaths in 1999 to 16,917 deaths in 2011. The numbers are based on mortality data collected by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In 2012, the latest year available, deaths from prescription painkillers dropped 5 percent to 16,007, according to CDC data made public Wednesday by the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy. Deaths from all categories of prescription drugs dropped 3 percent, the data show.

"It's some really encouraging news after many years of really grim news," says Michael Botticelli, acting director of the drug control policy office.

Federal scientists noted signs last year indicating the epidemic had slowed. Deaths from narcotic painkiller poisoning increased about 18 percent each year from 1999 through 2006, the CDC found. The increases slowed to 3 percent each year from 2006 to 2011.

While drug abusers may have turned away from prescription drugs, heroin use has surged, leading to a 35 percent increase in heroin overdose deaths, from 4,397 in 2011 to 5,927 in 2012, the data show. People addicted to prescription narcotics may turn to heroin, which offers a similar high.

Mark Publicker, an addiction medicine specialist in Portland, Maine, and president of the Northern New England Society of Addiction Medicine, says he's seen a striking shift from prescription painkillers to heroin that "is growing every year."

"My patients tell me that as prescription opioids become less available and more expensive."

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