

Study examines use of opioids

27 August 2008

Researchers from Boston University's Slone Epidemiology Center have found that in a given week, over 10 million Americans are taking opioids, and more than 4 million are taking them regularly (at least five days per week, for at least four weeks). These findings appear in the August 31 issue of the journal *Pain*.

Opioids are commonly administered for the treatment of moderate to severe pain and are among the most widely prescribed drugs in the United States. While these drugs have an essential role in pain management, there are concerns about potential abuse. Despite these concerns, characteristics of opioid use within the non-institutionalized US population are not well known, particularly for recent years.

The researchers conducted a telephone survey of randomly selected U.S. households; there were 19,150 subjects aged 18 years or older interviewed from February 1998 through September 2006. Information was gathered on all prescription and non-prescription medications taken during the preceding seven days. For each recorded medication, information was obtained on reason for use, type of administration, number of days taken in the week before the interview, and total duration of the current use.

The researchers found opioids were used 'regularly' by 2 percent of those surveyed. An additional 2.9 percent used opioids less frequently. Regular opioid use increased with age, decreased with education level, and was more common in females and in non-Hispanic whites. The prevalence of regular opioid use increased over time and was highest in the South Central region of the country. Among regular users, almost half had been taking opioids for two or more years and nearly one-fifth had been taking opioids for five years or longer. There was also a much higher prevalence of other medication use among regular opioid users compared to nonusers.

According to the researchers, given the large

number of individuals affected, the recent increase in public health concern for safe and effective pain management is appropriate. "From this nationally representative telephone survey, we estimate that more than 4.3 million U.S. adults are taking opioids regularly in any given week," said lead author Judith Parsells Kelly of the Slone Epidemiology Center. "The extent and characteristics of opioid use among U.S. adults reflected in this study reinforces the need to strike a rational balance between opioid misuse and effective control of chronic pain," she added.

Source: Boston University

APA citation: Study examines use of opioids (2008, August 27) retrieved 3 June 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-08-opioids.html>

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