



Every day in America,
approximately 50 people
die from overdosing on
prescription painkillers.
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Addiction in America

Many Americans are addicted to heroin and fentanyl, and more than 1,000 of these addicts overdose and die each week.

What has led to this increase in addiction and narcotic overdose deaths in our country? It is in part a result of the American healthcare system overprescribing opioid painkillers for the past 20 years.

When painkiller users run out of their medication, or when they can no longer afford the medicine, or when they begin to want something stronger, they often turn to illicit drug dealers to fill the need.

Of course, not all painkiller patients end up as heroin or fentanyl addicts—but many do. On average, about 75% of people in treatment for heroin addiction started their drug use with narcotic painkillers.

But some people skip the painkiller step and go straight to heroin or fentanyl use. Why is this happening in such record numbers? It's because so many Americans are hurting—either physically, emotionally, or both—and they are self-medicating to deal with the pain.

When people are in pain and/or despair with no options to improve their quality of life, they often turn to substance abuse to try to ease their discomfort and distress. And when drugs are easily and readily accessible, more people use drugs, more people become addicted, and more people die.

The fact that many Americans are in physical pain—and many more are

suffering from mental and emotional problems—is also evident in the increasing number of suicide- and alcohol-related deaths in the nation.

Drug- and Alcohol-Related Suicides

Suicide is a leading cause of death in America and is considered by thousands in the medical field to be the country's worst health epidemic. Many people who have died by suicide suffered from drug or alcohol addiction before their demise. In fact, people with a substance abuse disorder are nearly six times as likely to attempt suicide at some point in their life.

Substance abuse leads to depression, which often results in more drug or alcohol abuse—and ultimately, for too many people, this vicious cycle ends in death by suicide.

Drug addiction and alcoholism destroy families, careers, businesses, and personal and financial relationships, which increases the risk of suicide. Add to this the impaired judgment that goes along with substance abuse, and it is easy to see why addicts and alcoholics make suicide attempts.

But of all addictions, opioid addiction is the one most likely to end in suicide. Opioid use is associated with more than a 50% increase in suicidal thoughts, and a 75% increase in suicide attempts. Research has shown that opioid injection drug users are 13 times more likely to commit suicide.

On average, there are 123 suicides per day in America, and according to the CDC, that number is on the rise.

The Width and Depth of the Problem

As important as it is to work to reduce the number of overdose deaths and suicides in America, there are even more reasons to address the problem of addiction in our country.

With most people focusing on the number of deaths caused by drug use, the true depth of the problem often gets ignored. Drug use and addiction causes many more problems than death—from ruined lives and damaged families to multiple social problems and enormous financial loss.

A study published in the U.S. Library of Medicine in 2016 found that the total economic cost of the American opioid epidemic is more than \$75 billion every year.

Workplace Impact

A report by the Kaiser Foundation published in 2016 revealed that opioid addiction costs companies an average of \$2.6 billion annually. As a result of increased costs, many employers have cut insurance coverage for workers' opioid prescriptions.

Most major insurance carriers have been forced to increase health insurance premiums because of the opioid epidemic, and this has resulted in many companies no longer offering health insurance for workers.

The cost of the nation's opioid addiction to companies comes in at an average of \$26 per worker, and employees are

having to share this cost. For every \$5 increase in healthcare costs, companies typically cover \$4 and pass \$1 of the cost to employees.

Provide Alternatives to Use and Limit Access

How can America deal with this increased level of addiction and begin to reduce the number of overdose deaths and suicides? The solution is complex and multi-layered, but any way out of this epidemic that is to work must include providing alternatives for dealing with pain and limiting the availability of drugs.

The risks of using narcotic painkillers far outweigh the benefits for most people. But when individuals are in pain, if they are not given alternatives to opioid drug use, they will take the only option available.

When pain patients learn that they can reduce pain through the use of non-addictive, non-opioid-based medicines—along with specially designed physical exercises and alternative medicine approaches like acupuncture and meditation—many will avoid the risk of addiction and be able to manage and reduce their pain.

We also must begin to take steps to limit access to addictive substances in America. The attitude that drugs should be legalized in order to make them easier to obtain is counterproductive to preventing substance abuse and addiction.