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Over 50: The New Face of Drug Addiction?

by Vanessa Sheets

When Sue\*, a patient in her mid-60s, first came to the Delphi Behavioral Health treatment center, she’d been taking opiate pain pills for over 20 years to treat chronic pain from sciatic nerve damage. Initially prescribed by her physician, who cut her off once he realized she was addicted, Sue eventually turned to drug dealers to buy pain pills in her home town. After reaching a point where she was spending her entire income on pain pills, she decided to undergo addiction treatment.

Sue isn't alone. As older adults face the challenges of aging aches and pains, many turn to their doctors for relief.

“Primary care physicians prescribe nearly half of all opiates,” says Dr. Marc Romano, Director of Medical Services at [Delphi Behavioral Health](http://www.delphihealthgroup.com). “It’s not uncommon for these providers to contribute to the growing rise in opiate addiction among older adults.”

Prescription drug abuse doubled for those between the ages of 55 and 59 from 2002 to 2010, according to a report by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. In 2015, almost 30 percent of those enrolled in the Medicare prescription drug program utilized prescription opioids. Sean Cavanaugh, Deputy Administrator and Director of the Center for Medicare, said in a [statement](http://www.hhs.gov/asl/testify/2016/02/t20160224a.html) earlier this year that we need Medicare reforms for better-coordinated care to address prescription drug misuse, overuse, and fraud, due to the rise in non-medical use of prescription drugs.

**Signs of Opiate Addiction**

“Individuals often start out taking pain pills to cope with acute or chronic pain,” says Dr. Romano. “If they take this type of medication for an extended period of time, they are likely to become physically addicted and may experience significant withdrawal symptoms when they try to stop.”

Dr. Romano lists these signs of pain pill addiction:

* Running out of a prescription before the next refill due date, a signal that they could be taking more than prescribed.
* Denying or becoming irritable when confronted about opiate pill use.
* Changes in mood state, irritability, and depression.
* Problems in interpersonal relationships with friends and family; beginning to isolate themselves.
* Problems with school or work.
* Financial issues.
* Engaging in illegal acts to obtain money to buy drugs.

**A Better Way**

Fortunately, alternatives to opiates for pain management exist- and have been shown to work. Dr. Romano recommends looking into antidepressants for chronic pain, and anti-seizure drugs like Neurontin and Lyrica have proven effective in treating pain. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDS) combined with muscle relaxers can help decrease pain without the risk of dependence and withdrawal symptoms.

Other non-pharmaceutical approaches including biofeedback, relaxation techniques, cognitive-behavioral therapy, yoga, and acupuncture have also been shown to help manage emotional and physical pain, without the risk of side-effects.

**Take Precautions**

Dr. Romano recommends alternative approaches to pain management whenever possible. If you do need to take opiate pain killers, he advises patients to get a family member involved in treatment to be responsible for monitoring drug use and report any signs of abuse to the treating practitioner.

While drug abuse is growing among older adults, you can help prevent addiction by seeking better alternatives to pain management and knowing the risks and signs of addiction to painkillers.

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