



Family and Friends, Not Doctors, More Likely to Act as Gateway to Opioid Misuse, Researchers Say

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It is commonly thought that when a person visits a doctor to get prescription pills for pain treatment, they are starting on the path towards addiction and drug abuse. And while this does occur very frequently due to the addictive properties of opioid medications, there is another narrative that is actually more common than this.

Non-medical opioid users are more likely to say that they began abusing opioids after friends and family members offered them the drugs, according to researchers. For many people, their loved ones are actually the ones who gave them the gateway drug that got them started on using harder drugs, such as heroin.

Researchers used a series of in-depth interviews with 30 opioid users from southwestern Pennsylvania to learn more about how addicted individuals got started on their habit. About 56 percent of the interviewees said that they began using the painkillers recreationally first.

According to Ashton Verdery, assistant professor of sociology, demography and social data analytics, and an affiliate of the Institute for CyberScience, Penn State, the national narrative often portrayed in media is not consistent with their findings. Heroin abuse is often depicted as something that starts after people are

prescribed opioid pills by their doctors.

This narrative holds that when the government cracked down on prescription painkillers and drug manufacturers began making pills more difficult to abuse in the late 2000s, these people then transitioned to heroin because of its lower price and the fact that it is widely available.

“There's a lot about that narrative that I think is an overly simplistic way of thinking about this,” said Verdery. “What emerged from our study—and really emerged because we decided to do these qualitative interviews in addition to a survey component -- was a pretty different narrative than the national one. We found that most people initiated through a pattern of recreational use because of people around them. They got them from either siblings, friends or romantic partners.”

The researchers noted that some study participants confirmed that they later engaged in “doctor shopping,” or visiting multiple doctors to get the same prescription repeatedly when acquiring pills from those initial sources become more difficult. Their findings were published in the *Journal of Addictive Studies*.

Understanding where addictive behavior comes from and where drug abuse begins can help improve interventions, prevention efforts, and treatment options.

“It's not just that people were prescribed painkillers from a doctor for a legitimate reason and, if we just crack down on the doctors who are prescribing in these borderline cases we can reduce the epidemic,” said Verdery. “Our results really don't speak to that framework. They speak more to the need of educating people how dangerous these pills are and warning them about getting the pills from friends and family because that's the way a lot of people are getting addicted.”

The researchers recruited 125 participants to complete a survey that sought information on their demographics, substance use, social networks, and risk factors. A total of 30 survey participants accepted an invitation to then take part in semi-structured, in-depth interviews that lasted about an hour.

The researchers selected non-medical opioid users from southwestern Pennsylvania because the region has been hit particularly hard by the opioid epidemic. The region also features both rural and urban users, making it easier for the researchers to get the data they needed. [Click the link to see Dallas's top rehab placement programs.](#)

Verdery suggests that the researchers would find similar results in other areas hit by the opioid epidemic. However, he also mentioned that their future research may explore addiction pathways in other communities and consider how other substance use may play a role in opioid addiction.

?We think that understanding this mechanism as a potential pathway is worth further consideration,? he said.
?At the same time, friends and family are critical resources that people who use opioids can draw on for support and help in seeking treatment, which is all the more reason to pay attention to how drug use affects and is affected by social relationships.?

If someone in the family is struggling with opioid or alcohol addiction, it is important to seek help. A combination of medical detox and behavioral therapy can go a long way in the fight against drug abuse. But because every individual is affected by addiction differently, a comprehensive program tailored to their specific needs is necessary. Look for a nearby addiction treatment facility today and find out how drug treatment programs work.

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