

1 in 5 Opioid-Related Overdose Deaths Involve Alcohol

Background

- Combined use of alcohol with opioids can lead to increased sedation that can have serious risks, including possible overdose.
- Because of these serious risks, it is recommended that physicians review with patients the potential harms when opioids are taken with alcohol. Despite these recommendations, previous research has shown that the use of alcohol in combination with opioids is still high and can often result in lethal overdoses.

What were we investigating?

This study examined the death investigations from the Office of the Chief Coroner of Ontario to explore the involvement of alcohol in opioid-related deaths in Ontario.

Study Details

How was the study conducted?

- We conducted a population-based study among residents of Ontario who died of an opioid-related cause as determined by the Office of the Chief Coroner of Ontario between January 1, 1993 and December 31, 2013.
- Characteristics of individuals who died of an opioid overdose were compared based on whether or not there was alcohol involvement and manner of death (i.e. accidental, suicide or undetermined cause).

What did we find?

- Between 1993 and 2013, 22% of opioid-related deaths occurring in Ontario involved alcohol.
- Over the study period, the rate of opioid-related deaths increased 288%, from 11.9 deaths per million (1993) to 46.2 deaths per million (2013), which was largely driven by accidental deaths that did not involve alcohol.
- Although the absolute annual rate of opioid-related deaths involving alcohol doubled from 4.5 deaths per million (48 deaths) to 10.1 deaths per million (137 deaths) over the study period, the proportion of all opioid-related deaths involving alcohol declined from 38% (48 of 126 deaths) in 1993 to 22% (137 of 626 deaths).
- In 2013, the majority of opioid-related deaths were accidental, regardless of whether they involved alcohol (111 of 137 deaths; 81% with alcohol vs. 381 of 489 deaths; 78% without alcohol).



Key Points

- Rising rates of opioid-related deaths have been driven by accidental deaths that do not involve alcohol.
- Despite this, the rate of opioid-related deaths involving alcohol more than doubled between 1993 and 2013. By 2013, 22% of opioid-related deaths involved alcohol.
- People whose deaths were due to a combination of opioids and alcohol were more likely to be men and to have a history of alcohol use disorder. However, they were less likely to have been recently hospitalized and to have had other prescribed or illicit drugs in their system at time of death.

Recommendations

Policymakers

Given that approximately 1 in 5 opioid-related deaths involve alcohol, policymakers should consider continued targeted messaging to physicians and the public regarding the risks of using opioids in combination with alcohol.

Clinicians

Clinicians should continue to reinforce caution regarding alcohol use when prescribing opioids to patients, especially among patients with a history of alcohol abuse.

Patients and Caregivers

If you are taking opioids, it is important to avoid drinking alcohol and to speak to your doctor about any questions you may have about risks of combining opioids with other drugs.

For More Information

Gomes et al. Prevalence and characteristics of opioid-related deaths involving alcohol in Ontario Canada. *Drugs & Alcohol Dependence*, 2017.