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Deaths From Overdose of Painkillers Rose 83% From 1999 to 2005

Several articles appearing on February 9, 2009 reported that the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has issued letters to companies that make opioid drugs, including morphine, oxycodone and methadone, requiring them to develop plans to reduce the misuse of their painkillers. These drugs include such commonly used drugs like OxyContin, fentanyl patches, methadone tablets and some morphine tablets. According to the articles these drugs are highly addictive and meant for usage in cases requiring round-the-clock pain management for patients with cancer and other serious chronic conditions.

One article in the New York Times noted that in an effort to reduce deaths and injuries from the improper use of these drugs, many doctors may not be allowed to prescribe them. According to an American Medical News article, deaths from accidental overdose of these drugs among people age 15-64 has increased 83% from 1999 to 2005.

In the AMA news article, Scott Fishman, MD, past president of the American Academy of Pain Medicine stated, "The prescription drug abuse problem is enormous and ... it seems to be getting worse. There's a substantial role that doctors have in this, and we have got to understand that we have a responsibility to our patients but also to society."

In an Associated Press article on the same issue, Dr. John Jenkins, FDA's chief of new drugs added that the FDA has issued a number of warnings over the past few years. He stated, "Despite these efforts, the rates of misuse and abuse, and of accidental overdose of opioids, have risen over the past decade." The article reported that about 21 million prescriptions for opioids were dispensed in 2007.