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## Opioid overdoses on the rise in children, becoming more severe, deadly, study finds

### AT A GLANCE

- Opioid poisonings (overdoses) are a growing problem in children and adolescents: in the past 14 years, 1 in 4 poisonings occurred in those younger than 19, according to research being presented at SCCM's Critical Care Congress.
- Nearly 1 in 10 children and adolescents who overdosed on opioids were admitted to a critical care unit between 2015 and 2018.
- In that time period, more than 1 in 5 opioid overdoses were an attempted suicide, a trend that has increased in the last 14 years.
- Opioid poisonings among this group are becoming increasingly severe and more likely to be life-threatening or lead to significant disability or disfigurement.

ORLANDO, Fla. – More than 1 in 4 opioid poisonings involve children and adolescents and they have become increasingly severe during the last 14 years, suggests an analysis of national data presented at the Society of Critical Care Medicine's 49<sup>th</sup> Critical Care Congress.

The study provides a more comprehensive and detailed analysis of the impact of opioid poisonings (overdoses) on children and adolescents than previous reports, which focused on deaths.

"Our findings suggest the opioids children and adolescents have access to are increasingly potent and even small doses of them can cause severe health problems or death," said Megan Land, M.D., lead author of the study and a pediatric critical care fellow at Emory University, Atlanta. "Despite efforts to limit and monitor access to prescription opioids, the proportion of admissions to the critical care unit for acute opioid poisonings in children is rising, especially following attempted suicide."

Assessing the 753,592 opioid poisoning cases reported to the National Poison Data System between 2005 and 2018, the researchers determined 207,543 (27.5%) involved those younger than 19 years old. They also identified increases in several trends related to opioid poisonings in children and adolescents over three eras (2005-2009,

2010-2014 and 2015-2018):

- The percentage of patients admitted to a critical care unit increased from 6.6% to 9.6%
- Deaths increased from .18% to .28%
- The likelihood of the overdose being life-threatening and resulting in significant disability or disfigurement increased from .10% to .13%
- Suicidal intent increased from 13.9% to 21.2%
- Naloxone administration increased from 42.3% to 50.8%

Researchers found children and adolescents who overdosed on fentanyl, heroin or methadone were most likely to require a procedure in a pediatric intensive care unit (PICU), such as

mechanical ventilation, cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), dialysis and naloxone administration.

Research has shown more than 70% of people who use opioids for non-medical reasons get them from family and friends.

“Parents, pediatricians, teachers, coaches, counselors, everyone who interacts with children and adolescents needs to be aware of the risk of self-harm, misuse and abuse of opioids, and restrict access to them in the home,” said Jocelyn Grunwell M.D, Ph.D., co-author of the study and assistant professor in the department of pediatric critical care, Emory University. “And clearly there’s a need for effective policy changes to better identify children with mental health issues and help them and their families get services to prevent suicide attempts.”

### **THE SOCIETY OF CRITICAL CARE MEDICINE**

*The Society of Critical Care Medicine (SCCM) is the largest nonprofit medical organization dedicated to promoting excellence and consistency in the practice of critical care. With members in more than 100 countries, SCCM is the only organization that represents all professional components of the critical care team. The SCCM Critical Care Congress brings together intensivists and critical care experts from around the world to share the latest scientific research, develop solutions to common issues and improve the care of critically ill and injured patients. Visit [sccm.org](http://sccm.org) for more information. Follow [@SCCM](https://twitter.com/SCCM) on Twitter or visit us on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/SCCM).*

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