**Declining Opioid Prescriptions**

Opioid prescribing has declined substantially across the United States between 2014 and 2017, however, relative to large metropolitan areas, those in rural areas were 87% more likely to be prescribed opioids during this period, according to a CDC report.

As drug overdoses have become the leading cause of accidental death in the United States, the CDC and other public health authorities have moved to promote more judicious prescribing of opioid pain medications. These medications were involved in one-quarter of overdose deaths in 2017, and many individuals who use heroin have a history of misusing prescription opioids, according to the authors. To assess current prescribing trends, the CDC analyzed deidentified patient data from athenahealth, an electronic medical record provider. The analysis included more than 31,000 US primary care practices caring for 17 million patients from January 2014 through March 2017.

The analysis showed a significant decline in opioid prescribing from 7.4% of patients between January 2014 and January 2015 to 6.4% after the CDC issued its March 2016 opioid prescribing guidelines. Although prescribing rates in both rural and metropolitan areas decreased, overall prescribing in rural areas remained higher in 2016 and 2017 at about 9% vs about 5% in major metropolitan areas.

Higher prescribing in rural areas may be linked to a higher prevalence of chronic pain, larger elder populations with pain-related conditions, or prescription drug use and misuse at earlier ages, the authors note. Clinicians in these areas also may also be more strongly influenced by their relationships with patients contributing to prescribing that isn’t consistent with guidelines. Patients in these areas also have less access to alternative pain medication.

“As less densely populated areas appear to indicate both substantial progress in decreasing opioid prescribing and ongoing need for reduction, community health care practices and intervention programs must continue to be tailored to community characteristics,” the authors wrote.

**US Contraceptive Use**

Nearly two-thirds of US women used contraceptives between 2015 and 2017, according to a CDC report. Most of the 35% of women who reported not using contraceptives cited a current pregnancy, desire to get pregnant, or a lack of sexual activity as reasons.

Previous data from the CDC have shown that virtually all US women use contraception at some point in their lifetimes. The new data from the National Survey of Family Growth show that the most popular options during the 2015-2017 years were female sterilization (18.6%), the pill (12.6%), long-acting reversible contraceptives (LARCs) (10.3%), and male condoms (8.7%). The report found that use of contraceptives tends to increase as women age, with more than 70% of women in their 30s and 40s using contraceptives compared with 37.2% of those aged 15 through 19 years and 61.9% of those in their 20s. Older women were more likely to rely on female sterilization than younger ones. Conversely, use of the pill tended to decline with age, with 16.6% of those aged 15 through 19 years and 19.5% of women in their 20s selecting this option compared with 11% of those in their 30s and 5.1% in their 40s. Use of condoms and LARCs was highest among women in their 20s and 30s.

Use of contraceptives was not statistically different between white (67%) and Hispanic women (64.4%), but was slightly lower among black women (59.9%). There were no differences in overall contraceptive use by educational level. Use of condoms and LARCs was fairly consistent across race/ethnic groups. But use of condoms and the pill was higher among those with higher levels of education.

“Understanding variation in contraceptive use across social and demographic characteristics offers potential insight into larger fertility patterns, including birth rates and incidence of unintended pregnancies,” the authors wrote. – Bridget Kuehn, MSJ

Note: Source references are available through embedded hyperlinks in the article text online.