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White suburbanites going from pain pills to heroin

Experts say drugs are similar, and addicts will switch when one becomes unavailable

By [Robert McCoppin](#), Tribune reporter

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Hurt in a car crash, a Geneva woman got hooked on the painkiller Vicodin. When one doctor stopped prescribing it, she got it from others and was sneaking around so much that her husband thought she was cheating, said her counselor, Jake Epperly.

The face of drug addiction, experts say, is increasingly white, suburban and upper-middle class. New users include older adults seeking relief from pain and teens looking for a high.

The resulting abuse of prescription medications represents the greatest epidemic in drug abuse since crack cocaine ravaged cities in the 1980s and 1990s, said Epperly, owner of New Hope Recovery Center in Chicago and Geneva.

Statistics tend to back him up. Deaths from prescription drugs tripled nationwide from 2000 to 2008 and exceeded deaths from heroin and cocaine combined, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Drug deaths reached an all-time high of almost 37,500 in 2009, the tipping point in an ongoing trend reported by the Los Angeles Times: For the first time, drugs killed more people in this country than car crashes.

In Illinois, drug deaths first outnumbered traffic fatalities in 2006, when 1,410 drug-related cases were reported, according to the CDC.

As drug abuse has increased in the Chicago area, none of the traditional street drugs has gone away. Instead, heroin use has spread from the city to the surrounding counties, according to a 1998-2008 Roosevelt University study last year.

In Lake County, for example, researchers found that heroin deaths rose 130 percent from 2000 to 2009. In McHenry County, such deaths increased by 150 percent over one three-year period.

In Cook County, the number of deaths actually decreased during the decade leading up to 2008 with one notable exception, which underscores the spread of the drug: Heroin-related deaths increased 40 percent among white women, Roosevelt researchers reported.

Heroin and prescription painkiller abuse is intertwined, experts say. The two are similar enough

that addicts who run out of one may take the other as a substitute.

Users often start on prescription meds because they are easily available and considered safe. Once hooked, they may move on to heroin, which is now easier to try because it's pure enough to snort or smoke rather than inject, Epperly said.

Both types of drugs have something else in common: They are depressants that kill by suppressing breathing, particularly when mixed with alcohol or other downers.

And the most common way teens get started on prescription pills, according to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, is through the medicine cabinet at home.

Though the war on illegal drugs has been hotly debated in recent months, prescription drug abuse involves a product that is legal but controlled —and deadly when misused.

The DEA estimates that 1 in 6 people younger than 20 has tried prescription drugs to get high.

Jack Riley, special agent in charge of the DEA's Chicago division, said he's alarmed that drug cartels are starting to supply street gangs with prescription drugs. And the gangs are sending members to doctors to fake ailments and get prescriptions.

"It'll take educators, parents and law enforcement to go after people involved in prescription drug abuse —just like we're going after the Mexican drug cartels —because they're doing that much damage," Riley said.

Special delivery

A drug dealer is no longer someone standing on a street corner, law enforcement officials say. Instead, he or she may be, intentionally or unwittingly, a doctor or pharmacist, even a package delivery driver.

In June, an Aurora man pleaded guilty to conspiracy to illegally deliver drugs through a package delivery company. Prosecutors said Steven Immergluck, 35, a sales representative, and others recruited a pharmacy and doctors to write and fill prescriptions for an Internet drug provider. They then delivered the goods nationwide to customers' homes.

Through just one of multiple schemes, prosecutors alleged, the defendants delivered 35,000 packages and made almost \$500,000.

Similarly, a Calumet Park man was charged this month with illegally diverting the painkiller hydrocodone from the Skokie pharmacy where he worked, the DEA reported. Earl Newsome, 57, is accused of selling some 700,000 pills with an estimated street value of up to \$7 million.

Among users, Bill Stelcher, a retail salesman from Hoffman Estates, knows firsthand how prescription drugs can ruin a life.

Wracked with pain from a bad back, Stelcher, 44, had surgery in 2000. For three years, he lived with excruciating pain and took a succession of painkillers, including Vicodin and Oxycontin.

He was taking 30 to 40 pills a day and stayed in bed most of the time, but a pain management clinic kept renewing his prescription, he said. Follow-up surgery finally fixed his back, but by that time he was hooked, he said.

Five or six times he tried to quit on his own, going through painful withdrawal, but he ended up back on the painkillers, he said.

"The drugs completely take over," Stelcher said. "It was killing me. If I'd had it my way, I would have been dead."

His wife got him into rehab, and he has been clean for almost seven years, he said.

"There are places you can get help," he said. "It will bring life back. You can smell and taste and see things again differently."

Heroin in the cornfields

In Will County, the recent focus is on the troubling rise of an old scourge: heroin. A decade ago, the county had five or six heroin deaths a year, with most of the victims men in their 40s.

In recent years, the number of deaths has nearly quadrupled, to more than two dozen annually. More victims are in their teens and 20s, as John Roberts learned.

Roberts, a retired Chicago police officer, had moved his family to what he thought was a safe community in southwest suburban Homer Glen.

Two years ago, his son Billy, 19, tried heroin, Roberts said. The teen was put into rehab, then monitored closely to keep him away from other users, he said. His son went to meetings but didn't think he needed them because he wasn't an addict, Roberts said.

The teen turned up dead at a friend's house, he said.

"I thought I'd seen a lot and knew how not to become a victim," Roberts said. "It's like, 'How is this happening?'"

In response to such tragedies, Will County officials have started HELPS —Heroin Education Leads to Preventive Solutions. The program, launched in the summer, will use TV commercials and public speakers at schools and churches to warn about drug abuse.

Signs of opiate drug use include pinpoint pupils, too much sleep, too little motivation, unexplained absences and worsening school grades, counselors say.

Parents need to keep their prescription drugs away from children and throw them out when

they're done with them.

More generally, the Roosevelt University researchers recommend drug education for young people, increased funding for treatment and overdose prevention.

They also recommend limited protections for those who call 911.

Overdose victims die needlessly, health advocates say, because their friends are afraid they'll get arrested if they call for help.

In memory of his son, Roberts is pushing for a new law to give drug users immunity from prosecution if they call for emergency help.

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