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THE TIMES OF INDIA

Painkillers stepping stone for drug addiction

ANI, Aug 21, 2010, 03.52pm IST

Majority of the *drug addicts* first get hooked on drugs legitimately prescribed for pain, revealed a study by [University at Buffalo](#) physicians.

The study by UB's [Richard Blondell](#) and colleagues found that 31 of 75 patients hospitalized for opioid detoxification were first got hooked on drugs legitimately prescribed for pain.

Another 24 began with a friend's left-over prescription pills or pilfered from a parent's medicine cabinet.

The remaining 20 patients said they got hooked on street drugs.

However, 92 percent of the patients in the study said they eventually bought drugs off the street, primarily heroin, because it is less expensive and more effective than prescriptions.

They continued using drugs because they "helped to take away my emotional pain and stress," "to feel normal," "to feel like a better person."

The information will be used to train medical students and residents at the [UB School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences](#) and practicing physicians to screen for potential addiction among their patients, and to perform an intervention or refer for treatment before an addiction becomes life-threatening.

"We are seeing an increase in the number of patients addicted to prescription drugs, so we wanted to better understand how they first got hooked," said Dr. Richard Blondell, professor of family medicine and senior author on the study.

"This information suggests that there is a progressive nature to opioid use, and that prescription opioids can be the gateway to illicit drug addiction. It also tells us that people who use prescriptions illegally may be at greater risk for subsequent heroin use than those who use prescriptions legally," he added.

The study group was recruited from patients admitted to the detoxification unit in [Erie County Medical Center in Buffalo](#) who were addicted to opioids -- defined as opiates that are made from the opium poppy (morphine, codeine and heroin) or medications that are developed artificially (methadone or fentanyl).

The researchers found that slightly more than half -- 51 percent -- said they first used the drugs for pain -- after surgery, for back pain or after an injury, and 49 percent said because they were curious and/or someone they were with had the drugs.

Those who became addicted from using drugs legally prescribed for pain were more likely to be older, female, have a college degree and more likely to take their drugs orally, rather than nasally or via injection.

Users' comments on how they got started using drugs other than for pain, and why they continued, were revealing.

"Pill parties" were a common starting point. One person said the drug "was handed to me by my friend, this guy I know, someone who was at the party."

Another patient said kids are using it "like Viagra."

Prescription drugs are available in high schools, "at the prom" and used by athletes "to make it through the game," and later to get high on weekends and during the off-season, according to the users.

Results of the study appear in the current issue of [Journal of Addiction Medicine](#).

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