

Back Pain Center Feature Story[<< return to Back Pain Center](#)**Back Pain Treatment Varies Widely****Narcotics' use differs by region, insurance, education and income**

(HealthDayNews) -- Your doctor is more likely to reach for opioid drugs to treat your back pain if you live in the South.

Chances of being prescribed a narcotic also are greater for patients who are lesser educated, have lower incomes or have public -- rather than private -- insurance.

These are some of the surprising variations revealed in a study first published last year in the journal *Spine*.

"To my knowledge, there has been no national study to examine patterns of opioid use among individuals with back pain in the United States," Xuemei Luo, a research associate at the Duke University Medical Center, told *HealthDay*. "We looked at the pattern of use and the trend of use. We found there is a wide variation in opioid use among individuals with different education levels and income."

Back pain is a common health problem in the United States. The Duke team said that 20 percent of adults suffer at least one episode a year, and it found that people with back pain consume more than \$90 billion annually in health-care costs, with \$26 billion of that directly attributable to treating back pain.

For the study, Luo and her colleagues examined use of codeine, morphine, hydromorphone, hydrocodone, oxycodone, methadone, fentanyl and other opioids, using data from the Medical Expenditure Panel Survey, a national survey conducted by the government. Nearly 9,000 survey respondents from 1996 through 1999 reported back pain, defined as pain experienced in the spine area.

The rate of opioid use rose slightly over the study period, with 12.6 percent of those surveyed receiving at least one opioid prescription by 1999, up from 11.6 percent in 1996. The rate of oxycodone use doubled during the four-year period. Hydrocodone also increased, but at a slower pace.

Luo's team found higher rates of opioid use in the South and among people with public insurance, lower incomes and lesser education. For example, rates of opioid use ranged from 13.1 percent to 14.5 percent among those with less than a 12th-grade education, versus 7.6 percent to 10.8 percent among those with more than a 12th-grade education.

Dr. Arya Nick Shamie, director of the Comprehensive Spine Center at Santa Monica UCLA Medical Center, faulted the study for not delving into some important information. "We have to understand what the source of the back pain was to begin with," he told *HealthDay*. "We have to look at whether these patients needed opioid treatment."

Opioids are powerful pain relievers whose use remains controversial because of a risk of addiction. Experts say most back pain can be alleviated using over-the-counter pain relievers and anti-inflammatory drugs. But in severe cases, opioids work wonders to provide relief from severe pain and should be considered, Mayo Clinic researchers



say.

On the Web

To learn more about treating back pain, visit the [National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke](#).

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SOURCES: HealthDay News; Xuemei Luo, Ph.D., research associate, Duke University Medical Center, Durham, N.C.; Arya Nick Shamie, M.D., orthopedic surgeon and director, Comprehensive Spine Center, Santa Monica UCLA Medical Center, and assistant professor of orthopedic surgery and neurosurgery, UCLA David Geffen School of Medicine, Los Angeles; Jan. 1, 2004, news release, Duke University Medical Center; Oct. 3, 2002, news release, Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minn.; April 15, 2004, *Spine*

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