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# OxyContin, painkiller or just plain killer

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By MIKE FLETCHER

Tribune staff writer

From the Appalachians area to Kokomo, people are dying from the controversial drug OxyContin.

The powerful prescription pain reliever has become a hot new street drug that has resulted in more than 120 deaths nationwide, including 59 in Kentucky, six in Ohio, and 28 in Virginia so far this year, according to reports from U.S. Attorney Gregg Wood, Health Care Fraud Investigator for the Western District of Virginia.


For many people in severe pain, such as cancer patients and headache sufferers, OxyContin has been their "miracle drug."

But, the problem is that too many people, mainly youngsters, are improperly using OxyContin, a brand name for oxycodone.

"It's the so-called poor man's heroin," Capt. Michael Holsapple of the Kokomo Police Department said.

Since last year, police say the prescription drug used mainly for chronic pain has become a popular drug and has resulted in numerous investigations, arrests and one near death.

"It's been a problem in the community and I believe it may be a precursor for heroin looking down the road," said Holsapple, who heads up the Howard County Drug Task Force. "And the availability is causing robberies across the nation. Yes, it's a bad problem."



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Since being approved in 1995, OxyContin has become one of America's most prescribed medicines for chronic pain, with sales of \$1 billion reported last year.

The key to OxyContin is its timed-release formula, which releases the drug into the blood stream over a period of time to provide sustained pain relief, usually over a 12-hour period, Dr. Robert Steele of Kokomo said.

Dr. Steele, who cares for cancer patients and often prescribes OxyContin, said the real loser in the fight is the many people out there suffering from chronic pain who really need the drug.

"Used improperly is the key word," Dr. Steele said. "It's incredibly safe when used properly because it is time released which allows only a small amount of the drug within 12 hours. It becomes dangerous when kids crush them up and get the same dose within a couple of minutes.

"It hurts a lot of people and helps a lot," Dr. Steele continued. "We write tons of prescriptions for it. It's one of our most popular medications."

Because of the abuse, legislators are beginning to restrict access to the drug, which Steele said is not the answer.

"There are people who need it that shouldn't be punished," he said. "That would be the real tragedy, punishing the people with severe pain, because kids are abusing it -- that's not the answer. Punish the people who are violating the law, not the people who need it. It's a remarkably safe drug and effective drug."

Doses range from 10 mg to 160 mg depending on the patient and the illness. On the street, the pills range from \$5 to as much as \$20 a pill.

"It's mainly kids wanting to get a quick high and this is not the way to do it," said Howard County Coroner Brad Bray.

"We had one last year where we found the [OxyContin] pills ground up at the scene," Bray said of the one OxyContin overdose he recalled.

"With a lot of overdoses OxyContin has been part of it, though. But when we do a drug screen it shows up as an opiate not OxyContin, so it's hard to get an exact number. It's the new thing and they [users] just don't understand it can kill you."

In April, the dangers of the drug hit home in Kokomo when a Kokomo High School student overdosed and nearly died after taking OxyContin and other drugs, police reported. Two students who allegedly supplied the drug were arrested on charges of dealing OxyContin in the case. The two arrested, Steven Morphis, 17, and Eric A. Markle, 18, have upcoming trials in Superior Court 2. Morphis is set to appear for a jury trial July 24, while Markle's trial is for Aug. 21.

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Earlier this week, a Kokomo woman was arrested on charges she was selling the pain killer, along with marijuana, from her northside home.

Agents of the Howard County Drug Task Force, armed with a search warrant, raided the house at 903 N. Armstrong St., and arrested the resident, Tammy Johnson, 35, along with three others. She faces a class B felony charge of dealing in a controlled substance, a class D felony maintaining a common nuisance and a misdemeanor charge of dealing in marijuana, according to police reports.

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