

Heroin-related deaths doubled in two years, US study shows

Washington (dpa) - Heroin-related deaths in the US have quadrupled from 2002 to 2013 and doubled from 2011 to 2013 according to a report released by the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Tuesday.

In 2013 alone, more than 8,200 people died from heroin use, the study found.

Tom Frieden, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, connected the rise in heroin abuse to the massive prescribing by doctors of legal opioids.

In a telephone briefing to the media, Frieden noted that the street price for heroin was much lower than that for opioids, and has declined with increasing availability of supply and access.

"It's really a one, two punch," Frieden said.

"More people are primed for heroin addiction because they are addicted to prescription opioids which are, after all, really the same chemical with the same impact on the brain as heroin," he said.

According to the study, heroin use has increased 63 per cent between 2002 and 2013. The rapid increase has occurred among all demographic groups, and has doubled in some groups that are not generally as likely to use heroin such as females and Caucasians.

But the study said the people most at risk for heroin abuse continue to be low income people, white males, and 18-to-25-year-olds.

The study estimated that more than 500,000 people in the US used heroin in the last year.

About 60 per cent of heroin users use three or more drugs in combination with opioids, cocaine, marijuana, and alcohol.

People who are addicted to prescription opioid painkillers are 40 times more likely to abuse or be dependent on heroin, the study showed.

Frieden said that the solution calls for state programmes for preventing and treating heroin use, along with better education of opioid effects for medical professionals prescribing the drug.

He said that the CDC is working on federal guidelines for prescribing opioids, expected to be out in 2016.

"In the meantime we are asking providers to be judicious when prescribing these drugs because they are so powerfully addictive," Frieden said.

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