Opioids more likely to be prescribed to younger patients, by residents

by Carla Kemp, Senior Editor


Children were more likely to receive an outpatient prescription for more than five days' worth of an opioid pain reliever if they were under 9 years old, their diagnosis did not include an injury or if the medication was prescribed by a pediatric resident, according to a retrospective study at a Midwestern pediatric health care system.

With deaths due to prescription opioids at record levels, efforts to prevent opioid abuse have focused on developing prescribing guidelines. Some states recommend limiting prescription amounts to a three- to seven-day supply.

To describe prescribing practices in a pediatric acute care setting, researchers analyzed discharge data for children under 19 years treated at two pediatric emergency departments and two children's urgent care centers from June 1, 2012, to May 31, 2013. They sought to identify factors associated with oral opioid prescriptions written for more than five days.

Researchers collected data on patient age, sex, race/ethnicity, insurance, diagnosis, type and amount of medication prescribed, refills, and prescriber. Diagnoses were categorized as injury or noninjury.

Results showed prescriptions for opioids were written for 4,606 visits, and 3,991 had complete data for analysis.

Ninety-three percent of prescriptions were written for oxycodone or products that contained oxycodone. None included refills. The median number of days prescribed was 3.3, with a range of one to 44. Nearly 20% were for more than a five-day supply.

Independent associations were found between prescriptions for more than five days and younger patient age, urgent care visit, written by residents and noninjury diagnosis.

The authors concluded that education on opioid prescribing should be mandatory in medical schools, residency and continuing education for all physicians.

"By improving our prescribing practices, we hope to decrease the amount of opioids available for nonmedical use and abuse in the home and community," they wrote.