

Pain pill use down, deaths up: study

By Brittany Davis
09/20/11 © Health News Florida

The number of Floridians using oxycodone and other prescription narcotics declined from 2009 to 2010 even as deaths increased, according to a study released last week.

Broward and Palm Beach counties were hardest hit by the pain pill epidemic with the St. Petersburg and Jacksonville areas close behind, the study by Nova Southeastern University and United Way of Broward County shows. Overall, a little more than seven Floridians overdosed from prescription drugs daily.

The report compiled 2010 data and indicated that prescription-drug misuse shot up in Miami-Dade County as it decreased slightly in Palm Beach County. The study uses information from the Florida medical examiner's report, and is the only one to break impact down by county.

"A large number of pharmacies in Miami-Dade are more neighborhood-based, and we thought that could be a contributor to the low number," said James Hall, the report's author. "But now data are showing prescription drugs spreading into Miami-Dade."

Statewide, overdoses jumped to 5,276, up 7 percent from 2009. And people who died with drugs in their system climbed 10 percent to 6,608, which was another 10 percent higher than 2008. That includes people who had a drug-related car accident or heart attack.

While the average drug victim is a 34-year-old white male, the study found, those who seek drug treatment for narcotics are increasingly in their 20s.

Florida's prescription drug database and increased penalties for rogue pain clinics could mean that the data look different next year, and even more so in 2012, said Claude Shipley, who tracked the prescription drug problem under for former Gov. Charlie Crist's office.

Some argue that the data on deaths is overblown because someone with multiple drugs in their system may be counted as both a narcotics death and a cocaine death, for example. Others say the data underestimate the harm because not everyone is autopsied and some narcotics-related deaths may be attributed to car accidents or other causes.

Palm Beach County's success in lowering prescription drug deaths could stem from the fact that the sheriff's office and a non-profit group called NOPE Task Force have aggressively addressed the issue since 2007, Shipley said.

Detective Gary Martin of the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office said the department presents to schools, puts data from each overdose into a database and runs public service announcements to tell people that they won't get in trouble or get a friend in trouble if they call 911.

"This isn't something law enforcement can prevent alone, but we have managed to put a dent in it," he said.

-Reporter Brittany Alana Davis can be reached at 954-239-8968 or by e-mail.