

US Health Statistics: Americans Most Over-Prescribed Country in the World

A vitally important story reported in the April 15, 1998, issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA), sums up that a minimum of 106, 000 people die each year from properly prescribed medications.

This death toll may be as high as even 196,000, which places deaths from prescribed drugs between the 4th and 6th leading cause of death in the United States, just behind heart disease, cancer and stroke.

While only approximately 15,000 people die each year from illegal street drugs, over 100,000 are killed each year from properly prescribed medications.

The real drug problem seems to be the misuse and overuse of both prescription and over-the-counter drugs. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration say there are about 300,000 over-the-counter drugs available. Did you know that 75 percent of all visits to an MD end with a prescription? Did you know that pharmaceutical companies spend 10 billion a year to market their drugs?

The following article contains some alarming facts that you should be aware of. After reading it over, please share it with your friends. It is part of my job to keep you informed on health-related matters.

- In an average year, 1.6 million people are hospitalized due to the side effects of prescribed drugs. Up to 160,000 will die from their reaction (Dangerous Drugs, 1992).
- Americans consume 15 tons of aspirin a day, 19 billion tablets per year. Although thought to be harmless, a single aspirin will...

...Be responsible for 1500-2000 deaths,

...be the leading cause of kidney disease,

...Cause ulcers, toxic headaches and children's Reye's Syndrome.

- The average senior citizen gets 15 prescriptions each year (U.S. Health and Human Services Department 1992).
- For people over the age of 60, in one year there will be...(from the Public Citizen Health Research)

...1 million adverse reactions to prescriptions,

...243,000 hospitalized due to drug reactions,

...163,000 suffering from memory loss due to prescription drugs.

- 61,000 Americans will suffer drug-induced Parkinson's Disease this year.
- 32,000 suffer hip fractures annually including 1500 deaths from drug-induced falls (USA Today, July 29, 1994).
- 7600 deaths and 76,000 annual hospitalizations are due to internal bleedings caused by non-steroidal, anti-inflammatory drugs, most used for arthritis. Forty-one percent of these prescriptions are unnecessary (Ann Intern Med, 1997; 127:429-438).
- 23% of the elderly receive repeat prescriptions for more than a year without seeing a physician.
- In U.S. hospitals, a serious drug error occurs in one out of every 14 patients. (Harvard School of Public Health, Sept. 22, 1994).
- Medical malpractice is responsible for 80,000 deaths per year, one every seven minutes (Public Citizen. May/June 1994).
- Between 106,000 and 196,000 people die each year in U.S. Hospitals from properly prescribed drugs. Over 2 million suffer serious side effects. (JAMA, 1998).
- A 13-year study showed that 66% of all non-prescription drugs don't work. (U.S. Public Health Service, 1986).
- 4500 people die each year due to angiograms for the heart, with no evidence they work at all (Health & Healing).
- No studies have shown that heart bypass surgery extends life at all. Most studies show plaquing of the arteries again six weeks after surgery (Health & Healing).

- At present, there are in excess of 54,000 prescription drugs and 300,000 over-the-counter drugs on the market. (CNN Headline News, Sept. 18, 1995).
- Americans consume over half of all drugs in the world today. We are only 5% of the world population. This is at a rate of over 25 million drugs per hour.
- The average family has over 29 different drugs in the home at any time.
- Every third TV commercial is a drug advertisement. By the time the average child reaches 18, they have seen 20,000 hours of drug commercials such as “Plop-plop, fizz-fizz, oh what a relief it is!”
- Three of ten patients now request a prescription drug they have seen advertised. Doctors can net up to \$4,000 per patient referred to drug companies to participate in their studies. *Smart Money November 1999.*
- More than 11 billion is spent each year by pharmaceutical companies in promotion and marketing, \$5 billion of which goes to sales representatives, “It has been estimated that \$8,000 to \$13,000 is spent per year on each physician. This is about \$30 million each day. *Physicians and the pharmaceutical industry, JAMA, Jan. 19, 2000*
- If you take just one non-steroidal, anti-inflammatory (Motrin, Datril, Anacin, Ibuprofen etc.) drug every four days, over your lifetime you will have nine times the normal risk for vital organ damage (kidney failure, liver failure, etc.) (New England Journal of Medicine, 1994).
- 37% of people over 60 are taking five or more prescriptions at one time.
- Adverse drug reactions kill 73,000 elderly Americans each year (Sacramento Bee, 3-24-91).
- One-fourth of all older Americans are prescribed at least one “inappropriate and dangerous drug” each year (USA Today, 7-28-94).
- 40-60% of all antibiotics in this country are misprescribed (Health Letter, 1989;5(7):1-5.

- Approximately 180,000 people die each year partly as a result of doctor- caused injury. This is equal to three jumbo-jet crashes every two days killing all passengers (JAMA, 1994; 272:1851-52)
- Drug “problems” each year cost as much as \$182 billion, kill as many as 198,815 people, put 8.8 million in hospitals, and account for up to 28% of all hospital admissions (American Medical News; Jan. 15, 1996 P.11)
- Adverse drug reactions add an average of 4.6 days to the length of a hospital stay, at an average cost of \$5,857 (JAMA, 1997;227(4):307).
- Over \$75 Billion per year is spent on treating patients injured from bad reactions to prescribed drugs. Almost \$2 billion of this is spent on additional prescriptions (Arch Intern Med., 1995;155:1949-1956).
- Properly prescribed drugs are the fourth leading cause of death in the U.S. Only heart disease, cancer and stroke kill more Americans (Newsweek. April 27, 1998 P.61).
- Overall, 51% of approved drugs have serious adverse effects not detected prior to approval (JAMA, May 20, 1998).
- Up to 140,000 people die annually due to side effects of prescribed drugs (US News & World Report, Jan. 9, 1995).
- University Group Diabetes Program then conducted a large trial. Result: 250% more deaths in the group of diabetics taking oral hypoglycemic’s, compared with a control group of diabetics. These drugs were killing people fast. Diabetes, 1970, 19, Supplement 814.
- A whopping one out of every 17 times a medication is ordered to be given to a hospitalized child the child receives the wrong drug or dose according to a study in JAMA. JAMA. 2001; 285 (16): 2114-2120
- The National Center for Health Statistics reported 14,843 deaths in 1996 as a result of using illegal drugs. For that same period of time, The NEJM 1999; 34A: 1888-1899, reported 16,500 deaths as a result of using anti-inflammatory drugs such as aspirin and ibuprofen- 1,657 more deaths than caused by all illegal drugs combined. And that does not include deaths caused by legal drugs other than anti-inflammatory.
- The Journal of the American Medical Association reported in February of 2000 that the use of certain psychotropic drugs, like

antidepressants and stimulants, in 2-to-4-year-olds doubled or even tripled between 1991 and 1995.

- In 1999, the pharmaceutical industry spent \$1.8 billion to advertise prescription drugs, encouraging a projected 21.2 million consumers to “ask their doctor” about a drug they were not using.
- A Merck-Medco Managed Care report found sales of prescription drugs in 1990 to have generated \$50 million; by 1998 that figure had risen to \$90 million due in part to a 30% increase in the number of users and a 34% increase in days of use per user.
- Forbes magazine in 1999 found that the top 12 pharmaceutical companies generated a profit of \$27.3 billion.
- The United States consumes 90% of the world’s Ritalin, production of Ritalin is up 700% since 1990 and nearly 5 million people in the U.S. – mostly children- are on Ritalin.
- Between 1990 and 1996, the number of children in the U.S. using Ritalin grew by 250%.
- Up to 30% of cocaine addicts also take Ritalin. *New Scientist, April 16, 1998.*
- Ritalin users are three times as likely to develop adult use of cocaine. *Susan Schenk Texas A&M New Scientist*
- Every year, people consume 26 billion over-the-counter (OTC) aspirin and non-aspirin pain relievers, and doctors write more than 100 million prescriptions for these drugs. NSAIDs include medications such as aspirin, ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin), naproxen sodium (Aleve, Naprosyn, Naprox, diclofenac (Voltaren), indomethacin (Indocin), and many others. We estimate that approximately 16,500 deaths occur annually in the U.S. from ulcer related complications associated with their use. *The New England Journal of Medicine*, June 16, 1999.
- Swiss researchers report that painkillers are probably killing 2,000 patients each year in the UK. Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) are causing bleeding ulcers responsible for most of these deaths, they say. NSAIDs appear to block a coenzyme (COX-1) that protects the stomach lining. This research suggests that about one in 1,000 patients who take these drugs for at least two years will die from them. Pain, March 2000. Martin Tramer, et al., University Hospital, Geneva.

- Researchers from the University of Iowa, using a driving simulator to test allergy patients, report some rather unsettling findings: Those taking a standard dose of an antihistamine (diphenhydramine) were more impaired behind the wheel than those who had consumed a few alcoholic drinks. Some test judged the subjects' ability to match the speed of another vehicle and to stay in one's own driving lane. Those on antihistamines also did poorly when trying to judge if they were too drowsy to drive. *Annals of Internal Medicine*, March 6, 2000.
- A new study published in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* suggests that calcium channel blockers (CCBs) may have a detrimental impact on the brain. More than 65 years and older age group, all on blood pressure medication, were subjected to brain scans and intelligence testing. Those taking CCBs (and also those taking "loop" diuretics) did poorly on the intelligence tests. Their brain scans also demonstrated higher "white matter sensitivities," a finding previously linked to impaired mental function. *JAGS*, December 1997.
- In any given year 13% of doctors will be sued for malpractice. *LHJ*, March 2000, P. 102
- In a 1991 study of physicians it was found that only 1 in 5 physicians admitted serious mistakes in patients for fear of law suits lost licenses and other negative outcomes. Albert Wu, MD, Johns Hopkins School of Public Health.
- From 1997 to 1998, there was a startling 14.5% increase in prescription drug sales. *National Institute for Health Care Management.*