

NEWS

Opioids are commonly prescribed to women of reproductive age despite birth defect risk, US CDC study shows

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Although opioids are associated with serious birth defects, more than a third of US women of reproductive age who are enrolled in Medicaid and more than a quarter of those with private insurance fill in a prescription for opioid pain drugs each year, a study by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has shown.¹

Half of pregnancies in the United States are unintended, the researchers noted, and many may go unrecognized during the first few weeks—a critical time for normal organ formation. Opioid exposure during that time is associated with birth defects including neural tube defects, gastroschisis, and congenital heart defects, they wrote.²

The study was conducted by researchers at the CDC's National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities. Elizabeth C Ailes was the lead author of the study, which appeared in the 23 January issue of CDC's *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. In the study Ailes and her colleagues used commercial and Medicaid claims data to estimate the number of opioid prescriptions dispensed by outpatient pharmacies to US women aged 15-44 during 2008-12.

They found that such prescriptions were dispensed on average to 39.4% of women enrolled in Medicaid, the federal state run insurance plan for low income and disabled people, and to 27.7% of privately insured women each year. The most frequently prescribed opioids were hydrocodone, codeine, and oxycodone.

The high rate of opioid prescribing to women enrolled in Medicaid was a particular concern, the researchers said, because about 50% of births in the US occur to women who are enrolled in the program.

Opioid prescription rates were highest among women living in the southern US (31.5%) and lowest among those in the northeastern states (21.8%). Among Medicaid enrollees for whom information about race and ethnicity was available, the percentage of women filling in opioid prescriptions was 1.5 times higher among non-Hispanic white women (46.5%) than among non-Hispanic black women (35.2%) or Hispanic women (33.6%).

“Women who are pregnant, or planning to become pregnant, should discuss with their healthcare professional the risks and benefits for any medication they are taking or considering,” said Coleen Boyle, director of the National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities. “This new information underscores the importance of responsible prescribing, especially of opioids, for women of childbearing age.”

1 Ailes EC, Dawson AL, Lind JN, Gilboa SM, Frey MT, Broussard CS, et al. Opioid prescription claims among women of reproductive age—United States, 2008-2012. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2015;64:37-41.

2 Broussard CS, Rasmussen SA, Reefhuis J, et al. Maternal treatment with opioid analgesics and risk for birth defects. *Am J Obstet Gynecol* 2011;204:314.e1-11.

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