

Evaluating a Program to Lower Prescription Opioid Doses for Patients with Chronic Pain

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What was the research about?

About 60 million people in the United States live with chronic pain that lasts for months or years. Doctors sometimes treat chronic pain with medicines called opioids. But patients who use opioids for a long time are at increased risk for serious health problems, such as addiction, overdose, car crashes, and injuries. The research isn't clear if using opioids for a long time helps patients control their pain.

A network of clinics in Washington State started a program to reduce opioid doses prescribed for patients with chronic pain. The program had two phases:

- **Dose-lowering.** Doctors prescribed lower doses of opioids for many patients with chronic pain using opioids long-term. This phase started in 2007.
- **Monitoring.** Starting in 2010, clinics increased monitoring of patients taking opioids long-term and created care plans for them. Clinic pharmacies also changed the way patients refilled opioid prescriptions.

In this study, the research team wanted to learn if the program reduced the risks that go along with long-term opioid use. The study compared patients who received care at clinics with and without the program.

What were the results?

Patients who received care at clinics with and without the program had similar

- Rates of opioid overdoses
- Ratings of pain severity
- Rates of injuries and car crashes

During the dose-lowering phase, the rate of opioid overdoses decreased at clinics with the program, but not more than it did for clinics without the program.

Who was in the study?

The study looked at medical and public records for 31,142 adult patients who used opioids long-term. The research team also interviewed 1,588 of these patients.

What did the research team do?

The research team reviewed information on overdoses from patient records for three time periods. The first was before the dose-lowering phase started. The second was for the dose-lowering phase. The third was for the monitoring phase. The team also looked at numbers of car crashes and injuries. Four years after the program started, the team interviewed patients about their experience with pain. They compared patients from clinics with and without the program.

A group of patients and patient advocates helped design the study and review the results.

What were the limits of the study?

Policies about prescribing opioids changed in Washington State during the study period. The new

policies may have changed how doctors' prescribed opioids in both sets of clinics. Fewer patients received care at clinics without the program than at clinics with the program. As a result, it was hard to compare the groups of clinics.

Future research could study more people to better understand if reducing opioid doses helps lower the number of overdoses.

How can people use the results?

Clinics can use the results of this study when thinking about how to reduce opioid doses for patients with chronic pain.

To learn more about this project, visit www.pcori.org/VonKorff009.