

A painkiller that kills more than pain

By ACSH Staff — July 9, 2012

Methadone is probably best known as method of treating heroin addiction, but it s also a prescription painkiller used to treat chronic cancer pain and extreme bone pain. Unfortunately, the drug now accounts for more than 30 percent of U.S. overdose deaths, [according to the CDC](#) ^[1]. Compared to the 1999 rate, there were six times as many methadone-related deaths in 2009.

The amount of methadone prescribed to people in pain has increased dramatically, CDC Director Dr. Thomas Frieden observed. It s an increase most likely due to the drug s relatively low cost, yet as Frieden pointed out, that lower cost carries a higher risk than other available painkillers.

"The problem with this drug," ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross explains, "is that, not only is it highly addictive, but its half-life is extremely long ranging from 24 to 48 hours. This is highly problematic because this long half-life allows toxic levels of the drug to build up in the body, which can be fatal if mixed with other drugs.

The latest findings not only disappoint Dr. Ross, but the figures surprise him as well. It s difficult to fathom why methadone use has spread into the general population, he says. If doctors are prescribing methadone for non-cancer pain, they should somehow have to justify it".

However, while the CDC has warned health care providers about the risks of methadone, their warning has yet to put a dent in the number of methadone prescriptions dispensed.

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