



Keeping Kids Alive in Virginia

Adolescent Overdose Deaths in Virginia: A Preliminary Overview from the State Child Fatality Review Team May 2015

As of 2013, drug overdoses have surpassed all other injuries as the leading cause of injury death in the United States, including motor vehicle collisions. That same year, Virginians died from drugs or poisons more than any other injury, with an increase of over 13% from just the previous year, 2012. This alarming trend led Virginia's State Child Fatality Review Team to question how children are being affected by this epidemic. Team members elected to review all child deaths due to poisoning from 2009-2013 to identify risk factors and gaps in services and develop ideas for intervention and prevention of future similar deaths. Is this public health problem impacting children? If so, what are the contours and characteristics of overdose poisoning deaths among Virginia's infants, children and adolescents?

During the five-year span of deaths considered here, 41 children aged 0-17 died as a result of drug or poison overdose in Virginia and 26 of these deaths were to teenagers aged 13-17. The Team recently completed review of these teen deaths and determined that **100%** of them were **definitely** or **probably preventable**. This means that the multidisciplinary Team was able to identify clear threats to the safety of teens who misuse substances or are contemplating suicide, noting concerns of inadequate mental health and substance abuse treatment, lack of appropriate supervision given the teen's age and circumstances, and substance abuse among the teen's family and friends.

This preliminary report provides a brief summary of six key themes that have already been identified by the Team in its review of overdose deaths to teenagers.

Populations at risk are white teenagers of both genders.

- Nearly two out of three, 63%, of all poisoning deaths to children from 2009-2013 were to teenagers.
- Almost all of the teens in this review, 89%, were white. One teen was also identified as Hispanic.
- By gender, 54% of the teens were male and 46% were female.
- Roughly two-thirds, 65%, were deaths due to accidental overdose. An additional 27% were intentional overdose deaths (suicides). Two deaths were undetermined in manner.

Teenagers who die from overdoses have a history of substance abuse.

- Three out of four teens, 77%, had an identified history of substance abuse and 39% had a history of abusing at least one of the fatal substance(s) found in his or her system at death. Among these teenagers, 35% had once received a substance dependence diagnosis from a health care provider.
- Fifteen percent of the teens had been hospitalized at least once for an unintentional drug overdose.
- With regard to use of marijuana, 69% teens in this review had a history of marijuana use and 23% reported first using marijuana by age 13 or younger.

¹Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2015). *Prescription Drug Overdose Data*. Retrieved from: <http://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/data/overdose.html>.

²Office of the Chief Medical Examiner. (2015). *Office of the Chief Medical Examiner's Annual Report, 2013*. Retrieved from: <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/medExam/documents/pdf/Annual%20Report%202013.pdf>.

- More than half of the teenagers, 54%, had a history of prescription medication abuse. This included a history of oxycodone and/or hydrocodone³ abuse (35%) and a history of alprazolam and/or clonazepam⁴ abuse (31%). One in five children, 19%, reported abusing prescription drugs by age 13 or younger.
- Fewer teens, 15%, had used heroin; 15% had used MDMA/Ecstasy; 8% had used cocaine, and 8% had used LSD. In nearly one quarter of these deaths, 23%, the teen had used illicit drugs other than marijuana before age 16.

Overdoses from prescription medications represent the largest poisoning risk to teenagers.

- Prescription medication was the largest poisoning risk in this review of overdoses among teenagers. Nearly three-quarters (73%) of the deaths were caused by prescription medication.
- The most common class of prescription medication included in the cause of death was narcotic (84% of teen overdoses due to prescription medication(s)).
- An anti-depressant caused death in 26% of prescription medication deaths and contributed to the death in one.
- The teen had a prescription for all or some of the fatal prescription medications found in his/her system at death in 27% of cases. All or some of that medication was prescribed to a parent or caregiver in 23%. In three cases, all or some of the medication was purchased illegally.
- Over-the-counter (OTC) medication caused death in four cases and in all of those, the OTC medication was used in combination with another substance. OTC medication included diphenhydramine⁵, chlorpheniramine⁶, and dextromethorphan⁷.

Teens who die from overdose are growing up in substance using and abusing families.

- Slightly more than half of the teenagers' parents or caregivers (54%) had a substance abuse history.
- The Team noted that parents or caregivers "enabled" the child's substance use in 58% of cases by allowing or facilitating this use. For example, parents or caregivers supplied illicit or abused substances to the teenager on at least one occasion in 19% of cases.
- In eight percent of cases, parents or caregivers relied on the decedent teen to obtain substances for their own use.

In cases of adolescent suicide, others know of their risk for suicide.

- Nearly half of the teens in this review, 46%, had reported suicidal ideation(s) in the past. One in three, 31%, had a previous suicide attempt. In 12% of cases, the teenager had been hospitalized for a suicide attempt by overdose.

Teens who die from overdose are involved with the health and mental health care systems.

- At the time of their deaths, 50% of teens had a previous or current diagnosis of depression. Other common mental health diagnoses included Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (39%), anxiety (31%), and Oppositional Defiant Disorder (19%).
- More than half of the teens, 54%, had received mental health treatment. More than a quarter of teens, 27%, had received substance abuse treatment.
- A teen's pediatrician noted or suspected his or her substance abuse in 35% of cases.

³Opioid medications used to treat moderate to severe pain.

⁴Benzodiazepines used to treat anxiety and/or panic disorders.

⁵Used to treat common colds, allergies, nausea, motion sickness, asthma, and hives

⁶Used to treat common colds, allergies, asthma, and hives.

⁷Used to suppress coughs.