There are an estimated 62.5 million women of childbearing age in the United States, and in 2011, there were 5.9 million pregnancies. But chronic pain is on the rise among women, and so is the use of prescription opioids, including during pregnancy. This combination poses special risks to both pregnant women and their babies.

**Chronic pain is on the rise among women in America.**

An increasing number of women are suffering from conditions that limit activity and can cause chronic pain.

- In 2006, 15% of women had at least one activity limitation.\(^1\)
  - From 2009-2011, 38.3% of women had at least one activity limitation.\(^2\)
- From 2009-2011, the top two limiting conditions were:
  - Back and neck problems, affecting 29.1%
  - Arthritis/rheumatism 27.5%
- These conditions can cause severe pain, and are often treated with prescription opioids. Opioids are the most widely available and well-insured chronic pain treatment.

**Use of prescription opioids to treat chronic pain has increased dramatically along with abuse, misuse, addiction and overdose.**

**Deaths from prescription opioid overdoses are increasing more quickly for women than for men.**\(^3\)

- Women are more likely than men to be prescribed opioid medicines for pain, to use them long-term, and to receive prescriptions for higher doses.
- Although more men die from prescription opioid overdoses than women, deaths from prescription opioids increased fivefold between 1999 and 2010 for women; and increased 3.6 times for men.

**Prescription opioid use is significant among reproductive-age women.**

- More than 1/3 of women ages 15-44 enrolled in Medicaid, and more than 1/4 of those with private insurance filled a prescription for an opioid pain medication each year during 2008-2012.\(^4\)
- The higher frequency of opioid prescribing to Medicaid-enrolled women is of concern because approximately half of U.S. births occur to Medicaid-enrolled women. Non-medication pain treatments, such as physical therapy and psychotherapy, are often not covered by Medicaid programs.
- The national prevalence of opioid abuse or dependence during pregnancy increased 127% from 1998 to 2011.\(^5\)

**The number of infants being born with Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS) or Neonatal Opioid Withdrawal Syndrome (NOWS) has increased dramatically.**

- Since 2004, the number of children treated for NAS rose nearly fourfold, from 7 cases per 1,000 babies admitted to neonatal intensive care units to 27 cases per 1,000.\(^6\)
- In both NOWS and NAS, infants are dependent on prescription opioids and endure withdrawal after birth.

**Use of prescription opioids during pregnancy can be dangerous for mother, developing fetus and baby:**\(^7,8\)

- For the mother, it can increase the odds of death, cardiac arrest, preterm labor; transfusion, and cesarean delivery.
- For the baby it can result in stillbirth; low birth weight; respiratory conditions; premature birth; brain, spine, and heart defects, and NOWS.
Women, Pregnancy & Prescription Opioids

Sources


