Press Release

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SAFE Glen Cove Coalition: NIDA Research - Men Died of Overdose at 2-3 Times Greater a Rate than Women in the U.S. in 2020-2021

According to a new study conducted by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), men were significantly more vulnerable than women to overdose deaths involving opioid and stimulant drugs in 2020-2021. Researchers analyzed death records data from across the United States and found that men had a 2–3 times greater rate of overdose mortality from opioids (like fentanyl and heroin) and psychostimulants (like methamphetamine and cocaine). While it has been known that men use drugs at higher rates than women, the researchers found that this alone does not explain the gap in overdose deaths, noting that biological, behavioral, and social factors likely combined to increase the mortality risk for men.

Though men and women are being exposed to the modern, fentanyl-contaminated drug supply, something is leading men to die at significantly higher rates. It may be that men use drugs more frequently or in greater doses, which could increase their risk of death, or there may be protective factors among women that reduce their risk of death compared to men. Understanding the biological, behavioral, and social factors that impact drug use and our bodies' responses is critical to develop tailored tools to protect people from fatal overdose and other harms of drug use.

In 2021, nearly 107,000 people died of a drug overdose, largely driven by potent, illicit fentanyl which now contaminates the drug supply. Data have consistently shown that the rate of drug overdose deaths is significantly higher for men than women. In addition, data suggest that men are more likely than women to use almost all types of illicit drugs. Building on these data, researchers sought to determine the extent to which this known sex difference in overdose mortality varies by drug, state, and age, and to investigate whether the increased rate of overdose death among men held true when controlling for higher rates of drug misuse among men compared to women.

For specific drugs, and after controlling for the sex-specific rate of drug misuse, the researchers found that the overall rates of drug overdose death by sex from 2020-2021 were:

- Synthetic opioids (e.g., fentanyl): 29.0 deaths per 100,000 people for men, compared to 11.1 for women
- Heroin: 5.5 deaths per 100,000 people for men, compared to 2.0 for women
- Psychostimulants (e.g., methamphetamine): 13.0 deaths per 100,000 people for men, compared to 5.6 for women
- Cocaine: 10.6 deaths per 100,000 people for men, compared to 4.2 for women

The higher overdose death rate in men was observed across the lifespan (ages 15-74 overall) and was consistent across states, even after accounting for other demographic factors such as household net worth. In addition, when the researchers analyzed the data by 10-year age groups, they found that for overdose deaths involving synthetic opioids like fentanyl, men had greater rates than women across each group within the entire 15-74 age range measured in the study. For the three other drug categories assessed, men also had greater overdose mortality rates compared to women across the lifespan, with few exceptions.

While researchers also found that men reported misusing drugs more than women, the magnitude of difference recorded for overdose mortality between men and women was substantially greater than the difference of reported drug misuse. For example, researchers found that men had a 2.8 greater rate of cocaine overdose mortality compared to women, though men only had a 1.9 greater rate of cocaine misuse compared to women.

The researchers maintain that the findings are due to a combination of biological (e.g., men may have a greater vulnerability to the toxicity of drugs than women), behavioral (e.g. men may use these drugs in a riskier way than women), as well as other social- and gender-related factors.

The results of the study emphasize the importance of looking at the differences between men and women in a multilayered way. Future research to investigate how biology, social factors, and behaviors intersect with sex and gender factors, and how all of these can impact addictive drug misuse and overdose deaths is needed.

The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) is a component of the National Institutes of Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. NIDA supports most of the world's research on the health aspects of drug use and addiction. The Institute carries out a large variety of programs to inform policy, improve practice, and advance addiction science. For more information about NIDA and its programs, visit www.nida.nih.gov.

The SAFE Glen Cove Coalition is conducting an opioid prevention awareness campaign entitled. "Keeping Glen Cove SAFE," to educate and update the community regarding opioid use and its consequences. To learn more about the SAFE Glen Cove Coalition please follow us on www.facebook.com/safeglencovecoalition or visit SAFE's website to learn more about the Opioid Epidemic at www.safeglencove.org.