

Life & Health Trend Spotlight

Opioid misuse and addiction

Today, 130 people in the US died of an opioid-related overdose if averages hold true. The opioid crisis continues to reach new heights and attract more headlines as abuse and misuse surge and spread around the world from already epidemic proportions in North America. In fact, the UK recently announced drug overdoses now eclipse suicide as the country's biggest killer of middle-aged men.¹ The devastation to individuals and families is obvious, but long-term effects reach deep into entire communities with a heavier load on public health systems and resulting drain on economic and social wellbeing. What does this mean for insurers?



Abuse hides everywhere, including among policyholders

While drug abuse is most prevalent in lower socio-economic groups, the opioid crisis is not isolated to one segment of society and many overdoses occur among middle-aged, employed individuals.

This increases the likelihood that existing policy holders, or new insurance applicants, may either have or develop health conditions which make them susceptible to misuse and addiction. Opioids should be prescribed with extreme caution in the treatment of acute, non-cancer pain. They are also undesirable for long-term use as over time, they can heighten a patient's perception of pain sensitivity and increase drug tolerance leading to misuse, addiction or overdose.



Background

Opioids are a class of pain-relieving drugs commonly used to treat chronic, non-cancer pain. They are available in different forms: prescribed (Methadone, OxyContin and Vicodin are the most commonly known), synthetic (Fentanyl) or illegal (Heroin).

The term "chronic non-cancer pain" remains an imperfect clinical definition but is generally understood to apply to common types of musculoskeletal pain syndromes, such as arthritis and low back pain, and for headaches. Progressive increases in opioid-related deaths have led to a significant reassessment of how opioids should be used. Opioid prescriptions in the US have decreased in the last five years, but unintended overdoses associated with both prescription and non-prescription opioids still remain high.

Methadone and OxyContin, as well as the extremely potent Fentanyl are associated with increased risk of overdose and mortality with a strong correlation established between dosage and mortality:

- <50 mg MME/day (morphine mg equivalents) is considered best practice for prescribing purposes
- 50–100 MME/day of a prescribed opioid is associated with an increased risk of overdose death
- >100 MME/day is associated with a significantly increased risk of overdose death.

Key Facts

Around the world:

- 34 million people use opioids²
- Availability of opioid painkillers increased by 68% in the UK alone from 2013–2016
- Most people who overdose on opioids are middle aged and employed

In the US:

- 130 people die daily due to opioid related overdoses
- Over 2/3 of overdoses occur in middle aged, employed, males
- Almost 1/3 of patients who are prescribed opioids will misuse them
- 4–6% of those who misuse opioids transition to heroin
- Approximately 80% of heroin users misused prescription opioids first

Psychiatric comorbidities such as anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, eating disorders, alcohol and substance use can also be common in the context of chronic pain and opioid misuse. These comorbidities further increase the mortality risk. Multiple non-opioid substances (benzodia-zepines, antidepressants, alcohol, cocaine, marijuana, antihistamines) taken together with opioids also play a major role in drug overdose deaths. Clinicians are strongly advised to avoid concurrent prescribing of benzodia-zepines with opioids where possible, and to consider annual urine drug screening to minimise the risk of misuse and overdose.

¹ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/08/06/drug-overdose-eclipses-suicide-biggest-killer-middle-aged-men/amp/>

² As of 2016

What does this mean for insurers?

Underwriting

- Caution: special consideration for these drugs on your prescription histories:
 - Oxycodone: Oxycontin, Xtampza ER, Oxaydo, Roxicodone
 - Methadone: Diskets, Methadone, Intensol, Methadose, Dolophine
 - Vicodin: Hycet, Lortab Elixir, Lorcet Plus, Verdrocet, Xodol 5/300, Xodol 7.5/300, Xodol 10/300, Vicodin HP, Vicodin ES, and more
 - Fentanyl: Duragesic, Abstral, lonsys, Subsys
- Review living benefits with caution since there is a strong connection between disability and opioid misuse.
- Life cover if available should be offered with an extra mortality rating.

Pricing

Inadequate underwriting of opioid users at time of application and/or deteriorating claims experience will inevitably result in increases to base premium rates.

Claims

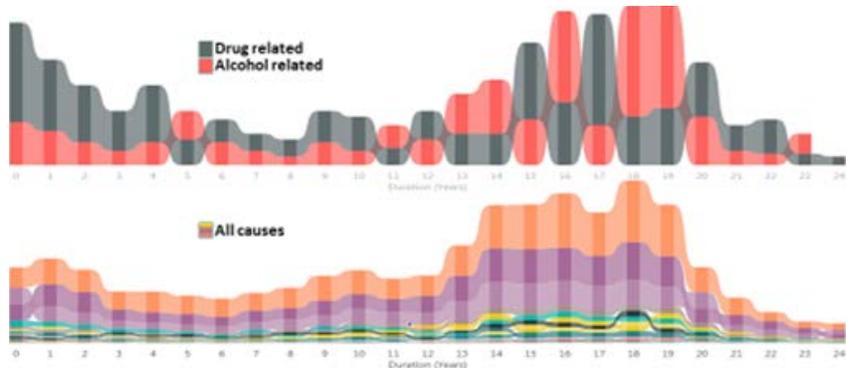
- Drug related deaths are increasing over time, in line with population trends.
As the graphic below shows, on average these types of claims will have a much shorter duration relative to most other causes except homicides.
- Swiss Re's research shows that Fentanyl, Benzodiazepines and Oxycodone are the most common drugs found in insured drug-related deaths.
- Opioid related deaths have started to impact our US portfolios and have the potential to pose a disproportionate financial impact globally.

Global news:



- Oklahoma wins lawsuit against major drug company, Johnson & Johnson
- In Nigeria, prescription drugs are being taken in life-threatening doses by millions in search of a fix
- Dutch deaths due to opioid painkillers rise 50% in four years
- As Scotland's 'Trainspotting' Generation Ages, the Dead Pile Up

Our experience shows: Opioid claims are higher than other causes in the early years of a life insurance policy³



What's next?

At Swiss Re, we continue to analyse portfolios for potential adverse claims that are the result of opioid misuse and addiction. At this time we are basing this analysis on fully underwritten experience, and it is not clear whether moving toward automated or simplified underwriting will increase exposure to opioid related deaths and disability.

Swiss Re's Life Guide contains the most up-to-date underwriting guidance regarding opioids. As always we will keep you fully informed as new developments emerge and Life Guide users can be confident you have the full benefit of this research and monitoring.

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Contact your local Swiss Re underwriter or Medical Officer for more information.

³ Swiss Re total portfolio (US only)

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