



A study published in the [Journal of Managed Care & Specialty Pharmacy](#) earlier this month sought to address the economic burden of opioid abuse and concluded that abusers of opioid pain medication had a significantly higher use of healthcare resources annually.

The findings of the study are important for both substance abuse treatment and for payers, researchers stated.

Per-patient incremental annual health care costs amounted to \$14,810 for people who abuse opioid painkillers, researchers found. They also found that opioid abuse and related costs most commonly occurred in the context of polysubstance abuse, including alcohol and nonopioid drugs.

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One suggestion that researchers had was to invest in the treatment of substance abuse disorders for non-opioid drugs and alcohol, as a way of reducing some of the costs associated with opioid abuse.

Almost 100 million Americans have chronic pain, and the estimated cost to treat chronic pain is between \$560 billion and \$635 billion a year. Opioids are commonly prescribed for chronic pain, as evidenced by the 207 million opioid prescriptions written in 2013. With more prescriptions comes more abuse. The 2015 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) found that more than 12 million people or nearly 5 percent of the population aged 12 and older, misused opioid pain medication in the past year.

Previous studies that quantified the economic burden of opioid painkiller misuse defined the costs by point of service and the cost data was allocated by six-month periods of observation. In contrast, the current study defined monthly costs that were anchored around the diagnosis of incident abuse, over a period of 18 months.

Researchers selected two mutually exclusive groups of incident opioid abusers and non-abusers. The data they used was drawn from de-identified administrative claims from OptumHealth Care Solutions and included more than... **(continue reading)**



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Economic burden of opioid abusers accumulates months before formal diagnosis, study finds

By Livia Areas-Holmblad - January 10, 2017

18 million insured beneficiaries of 84 self-insured companies located throughout the U.S. They used the definition of opioid abuse as per codes from the International Classification of Disease, Ninth Revision. Each individual was monitored over a 12-18 month period.

One of the most interesting findings of the study was that excess healthcare costs for those who misuse opioid painkillers began accumulating five months before a formal diagnosis of abuse. "Many patients had diagnoses for other substance abuse that predated their opioid abuse diagnoses," researchers stated.

An average of \$14,810 in excess costs to commercial payers was generated in the six months before and after the initial episode of abuse.

Overall, the total annual incremental healthcare costs were split almost evenly between treating opioid abuse and the abuse of nonopioid drugs and alcohol.

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The results showed that a sizable amount of the costs that payers related to opioid abuse may be incurred in the context of substance use disorder involving non-opioid drugs and alcohol.

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