

Prescription Opioid Use and Health: Evidence from Primary Care

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Abstract

We study the association between exposure to prescription opioids in primary care settings and opioid misuse, morbidity, and mortality among US veterans. For identification, we exploit variation in opioid prescribing tendency—within clinical guidelines—across providers in the same primary care facility, in conjunction with quasi-random assignment of providers to new patients. We find that assignment to a primary care provider who prescribes opioids at a 10 percentage point higher rate is associated with a 6.8 pp increase in the probability to be prescribed an opioid at first visit, 3.3 pp increase in the probability of long-term opioid use, 1.7 pp increase in the probability of receiving a diagnosis for major depressive disorder within 3 years after assignment, and 0.8 pp increase in the probability of an ED visit within 3 years after assignment.