**People using painkillers are putting their lives at risk by taking sleeping pills, researchers warn**

* **37**SHARES
* [COMMENTS](http://www.mirror.co.uk/lifestyle/health/people-using-painkillers-putting-lives-10027608#comments-section)

**BY**STEPHEN BEECH

* 23:30, 14 MAR 2017
* **UPDATED**14:34, 15 MAR 2017

Taking [**prescription**](http://www.mirror.co.uk/all-about/prescriptions)painkillers with sleeping pills puts people at greater risk of an overdose, researchers have warned.

The [**study**](http://www.mirror.co.uk/science/), published in the British Medical Journal, shows that taking strong prescription painkillers, known as opioids, together with benzodiazepines - widely used to treat sleep problems and anxiety - is associated with a greater risk of an opioid overdose.

The researchers say opioids should be prescribed cautiously among patients who are also taking benzodiazepines, and called for education programmes that warn prescribers and patients about the risks of taking both medications concurrently.

They said that, in many countries, the increased use of prescription painkillers and the resulting potential for addiction and overdose represent a growing public health concern.

Nearly 30 per cent of fatal "opioid" overdoses in the United States also involve benzodiazepines. The researchers said that raises the possibility that some of the increase in opioid related deaths might be caused by increases in their concurrent use with benzodiazepines over time.

They set out to identify trends in concurrent use of a benzodiazepine and an opioid - and to identify the impact of the trends on admissions to hospital and emergency room visits for opioid overdose.

The study involved more than 300,000 privately insured people aged 18 to 64 who were prescribed an opioid between 2001 and 2013.

They found that nine per cent of opioid users also received a prescription for a benzodiazepine in 2001, increasing to 17 per cent in 2013 - an 80 per cent relative increase.

Several factors that could have affected the results - such as age, sex and presence of other disorders - were then taken into account.

Compared with opioid users who didn't take benzodiazepines, concurrent use of both drugs was associated with a substantially higher risk of a hospital visit for opioid overdose.

The researchers said it was an observational study, so no firm conclusions can be drawn about cause and effect.

But study author Dr Eric Sun said if the association is found to be causal, elimination of the concurrent use of benzodiazepines and opioids "could reduce the population risk of an emergency room visit or inpatient admission for opioid overdose by 15 per cent.

Dr Sun, of Stanford University School of Medicine in the US, said opioids should be prescribed cautiously - even if only for a short term course - among patients who are also taking benzodiazepines.

He said education programme should also be implemented that warn prescribers and patients about the risks of taking benzodiazepines and opioids at the same time.

But the researchers warned that while concern about concurrent use of painkillers and benzodiazepines has led to warnings and guidelines, they are unlikely to change clinical behaviour, at least not quickly.

They point out that, unless systems are set up to push information to providers, "busy clinicians will struggle to keep up with their patients' use of different prescriptions."

Dr Sun added: "A multi-pronged effort from both regulators and experts writing clinical guidelines, along with extensive expansion in warnings about the hazards of drug-drug interactions, are essential to reduce low value, potentially dangerous care."