

Data Spotlight

Drug Abuse Warning Network

September 6, 2011

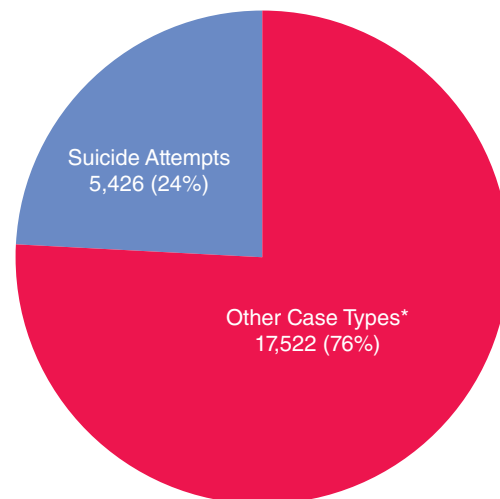
Medical Emergencies Resulting from Suicide Attempts Using Over-the-Counter Sleeping Aids

Over-the-counter (OTC) medications used for inducing sleep can either be formulated for sleep only or for other conditions, (e.g., allergy relief, with sleep aid as a secondary effect). That such medications can be obtained without a prescription belies their potential for misuse, especially among those attempting suicide.

During the period from 2005 to 2009, there was an annual average of about 23,000 emergency department visits involving OTC sleep medications¹ with no other drugs involved. Almost a quarter of these visits each year (24 percent) were the result of a suicide attempt (Figure). On average, more than two thirds of the patients seen for suicide attempts involving OTC sleeping aids only were females.

Physicians and mental health treatment providers need to be particularly concerned about patients with suicide ideation who use OTC sleep aids in a suicide attempt. Any patient using OTC sleeping aids in a suicide attempt should be considered at risk for a fatality and referred for evaluation and mental health follow-up. Simply because a patient has taken an OTC rather than a prescription drug does not make the attempt any less serious. Such patients have access to a ready supply of OTC sleeping aids and can easily repeat their attempts at suicide.

Drug-Related Emergency Department Visits Involving Only Over-the-Counter Sleep Medications, by Case Type: 2005 to 2009



* Includes adverse reactions (25 percent), overmedication (38 percent), and everything else (13 percent).

¹ The visits in this report involved medications that contain diphenhydramine and/or doxylamine only or in combination with other drugs (e.g., acetaminophen) and were involved in at least 10 ED visits per year. These medications can all be obtained over the counter, although some have stronger formulations that are available only by prescription. DAWN does not record whether a medication was obtained OTC or by prescription.

