

MEDIA RELEASE

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Research shows addictive pharmaceuticals Australia's fastest growing drug problem

- **More Australians are dying from pharmaceutical overdoses than all illegal drugs combined**
- **The number of people dying after using the most common form of opioid painkiller – codeine – has doubled in the past decade**
- **Most overdoses are accidental – and often the result of misuse such as mixing alcohol with medications or mixing medications**
- **Pharmaceutical overdoses are overtaking our national road toll**

A growing number of Australians are dependent on addictive pharmaceutical medication but have no idea they are hooked or putting their lives at risk.

The Alcohol and Drug Foundation (ADF) has today released a hard-hitting campaign in a bid to save lives, as research reveals the majority of overdoses are accidental.

In a series of powerful videos, everyday Australians reveal how they nearly lost everything after battling dependency to addictive medications.

The ADF has also released its Prevention Research report “Is there a pill for that?” which reveals the shocking truth behind a nation dependent on quick fixes.

“People are at risk of serious harm – and they don’t even know it. The average Australian is dying from these addictive medications,” said ADF spokesperson Ilka Burnham-King.

“But the most shocking finding is how many overdoses were accidental – which means they could have been prevented,” said Ms Burnham-King.

“Chronic pain, anxiety, stress, trauma and insomnia are all very serious conditions but are often treated long-term with addictive medicine like painkillers or relaxant-type medications.

“Strong painkillers – like codeine, Oxycontin™ and Endone™ – help a lot of Australians manage intense pain after surgery or dental work. But they are also opioids, just like heroin, and they can be fatal.

“The scary thing is, almost half of all prescriptions handed out in Australia are not for treating these conditions. People are using opioids for everything from the common headache to dealing with a bad day at work.

“Many Australians do not know that opioids are specifically designed only for short-term use.

“The number of people dying after using the most common form of opioid – codeine – has doubled in the past decade. In fact, in Victoria more people die from a codeine overdose than heroin.

“Medications like Valium™ and Diazepam™ can be used to help people deal with short periods of very intense stress, anxiety, or trauma. But just like the painkillers, they are addictive, and don’t actually treat the root cause of the problem.

“It’s time Australia took action to change its pill-popping culture and that’s why we are launching our campaign today called, **Are you taking a risk?**”

Key statistics

- Deaths from overdose of pharmaceuticals have doubled in a decade, with Australians aged 40 to 49 at greatest risk
- More Australians are dying from pharmaceutical overdoses than from all illicit drugs combined.
- About 70 per cent of prescription deaths were accidental
- In Victoria, 358 people died from pharmaceutical overdoses in 2015, compared to 227 from illegal drug overdoses and 257 in road accidents
- The greatest increase in pharmaceutical misuse is among men in their 30s and women in their 40s
- More than 200,000 Australians are misusing over-the-counter codeine. The majority are well-educated, employed and not illegal drug users
- Prescriptions for strong painkillers have increased from half a million in 1992 to 7.5 million in 2012

Talent available for interview:

Dr Hester Wilson: Medical practitioner and an expert in addictive medication

Soula Mantalvanos: Overcame her dependency to both pain and strong relaxant medication

Chris Phillips: Overcame his pain medication dependency after a serious accident

Anna McMahon: Mother who lost her son to a prescription overdose

Ilka Burnham-King: Alcohol and Drug Foundation campaign spokesperson

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About the Alcohol and Drug Foundation : Celebrating more than 55 years of service to the community, the Alcohol and Drug Foundation is one of Australia’s leading bodies committed to preventing alcohol and other drug problems in communities around the nation. The Foundation reaches millions of Australians in local

communities through sporting clubs, workplaces, health care settings and schools, offering educational information, drug and alcohol prevention programs and advocating for strong and healthy communities.