The prescription drug methadone has contributed significantly to the rise in prescription painkiller overdoses over the last decade, according to a report released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently.

While the drug accounted for 2 percent of painkiller prescriptions in the United States in 2009, it was involved in more than 30 percent of prescription painkiller overdose deaths. Six times as many people died of methadone overdoses in 2009 than in 1999.

CDC researchers analyzed national data from 1999-2010, as well as 2009 data from 13 states who were part of the Drug Abuse Warning Network, a surveillance system for drug-related deaths run by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Methadone has traditionally been used as a treatment for drug addiction, but in recent years has been increasingly prescribed as a pain reliever. As these type of prescriptions have increased, so have the cases of methadone-related nonmedical use and fatal overdoses.

According to the CDC, methadone is riskier than other painkillers because it often builds up in the body and can disrupt a person's breathing or heart rhythm. Also the difference between taking the correct prescribed dose and taking dangerous levels of methadone are small. It can be particularly harmful when used with tranquilizers or other prescription painkillers.

Despite warnings about the risks associated with methadone by the Food and Drug Administration, more than 4 million methadone prescriptions were written for pain in 2009. Like other painkillers, it is often prescribed for chronic problems like back pain, even though it might not help these problems over a long course of time. Methadone is often listed by insurance companies as a preferred drug and is available as a low-cost generic.

"Methadone continues to play an important role in substance abuse treatment and should not be limited in its use for that application," said Linda C. Degutis, director of CDC?s National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. But, she added, "health care providers can take precautions to reduce the risks of methadone overdose when used for treating pain."

Prescription painkiller overdoes were responsible for more than 15,500 deaths in 2009.

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