

Prescription Drug Mishaps Cause A Shocking Number of Deaths

by Dr. Delia Chiamonte, [Baltimore Health Examiner](#)



We tend to worry about medical mistakes in the hospital but a recent study suggests that the hospital may not be the primary site for medical mishaps, at least ones involving prescription drugs. This study, published in the Archives of Internal Medicine, looked at 50 million death certificates over 22 years and they found a shocking number of inadvertent deaths due to prescription drugs. The other surprising finding was that the frequency of these deaths has dramatically increased in the past 20 years. In 1983 there were 3,954 deaths attributed to prescription drugs, and by 2004 the number had jumped to 22,770.

Perhaps this is due to newer available medications, but it may also be related to the trend of treating people with serious illnesses in the outpatient setting rather than the hospital.

It was the accidental misuse of prescription drugs that recently took the life of Heath Ledger. There were no illegal drugs or alcohol involved – only pain killers, sleeping pills and anti-anxiety medicines. These are all powerful medicines that interact with each other and are sometimes prescribed together. For example a woman with chronic pain and anxiety who was having trouble sleeping might come home from the doctor's office with the same drugs that killed Mr. Ledger.

Medicines prescribed for sleep, anxiety and pain are the worst offenders. If you have any of those in your medicine cabinet, be sure to take them only as directed. If you are on more than one of them, ask your doctor if the combination is safe. And, never, never, never mix alcohol or illegal drugs with any of those medicines. The results could be deadly. Stay safe.

Dr. C.

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Dr. Chiamonte is a private Health Advocate and the founder of Insight Medical Consultants. She has been quoted by CNN, The Wall Street Journal and USA Today as an expert on patient advocacy.

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