

Police: Heroin use on the rise

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Arrests of two people Friday by Oxford police on charges of dealing heroin are representative of a growing drug epidemic in the area, local law enforcement officials say.

The rise in the use and sale of heroin is a problem that Calhoun County shares with other counties across the state, and across the nation, those officials say.

“Jefferson County has had it really bad here in the last year, and we’ve seen it creep east,” said Oxford police Chief Bill Partridge. “It’s a very deadly drug, and unfortunately, those who are experimenting with it don’t know it.”

Heroin overdose deaths in Jefferson, Shelby and Tuscaloosa counties jumped from 15 in 2008 to 83 in 2012, according to an Aug. 19 press release from the United States Attorney's Office for the Northern District of Alabama.

Oxford police in the last two months have seen four overdoses believed to be from heroin use, Partridge said. Oxford EMS ambulance crews carry a drug called naloxone, used to treat opioid overdose patients, Partridge said, which was used to save those lives.

“The problem is, if you don’t get to them in time, they’re dead,” Partridge said.

Deaths as a result of heroin overdoses continue to rise, according to Calhoun County Coroner Pat Brown.

“In my entire two terms as coroner, I couldn’t recall any heroin deaths, until now,” Brown said.

Brown said that since April, two people have died in Calhoun County from heroin overdoses, and he’s awaiting toxicology reports on two more deaths he suspects were due to heroin use.

Partridge said the prevalence of heroin in the area prompted him recently to direct his department’s drug task force to aggressively pursue those cases. Other departments are seeing a similar rise in heroin cases and are doing the same.

“I don’t know of a death we’ve had, but we’ve had some near misses,” said Anniston police Chief Shane Denham, speaking of his department’s record of heroin overdoses in recent months. Several weeks ago, Anniston police saw three overdoses in one day, he said, and the problem doesn’t show signs of slowing.



Heroin

Heroin that was confiscated and taken into evidence by the West Milford Police Department is on display August 26, 2010.

“It’s here, and we’re trying to get out in front of it,” Denham said. “I’m not sure we’ll be successful, but we’re trying.”

One dose can kill

One danger in the drug lies in the unknown. A dealer may sell heroin that’s 8 percent pure and mixed with other substances one day, and the next he may sell a much more pure drug that, when taken in the same amount, can kill quickly, Denham explained.

“Your body can’t handle that. There’s no quality control,” Denham said. “It’s a tough road. It’s a road that a lot of people don’t come back from.”

Calhoun County District Attorney Brian McVeigh agreed that heroin use is increasingly more prevalent in the area.

“For years, we had seen little or no heroin, and now we’re seeing it on a common basis,” McVeigh said.

Heroin is becoming cheaper and easier to obtain than drugs that have similar effects, McVeigh said, which may be contributing to the drug’s rise in popularity.

McVeigh’s comment points to what many experts say is a cause for the growing heroin problem. A nationwide crackdown on prescription painkiller abuse may be contributing to the surge in heroin, they say.

Many abusers of the painkiller Oxycontin switched to heroin after the drug was reformulated to make it more difficult to crush, heat up and then inject, according to a 2013 report by the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

The black market price for the newly formulated Oxycontin was much lower than for the older version of the drug, which was more powerful and had similar effects as heroin, according to the report.

New markets

As the numbers of heroin users have risen in recent years, there’s also been a shift in the demographics of users, according to a July report published by the American Medical Association.

The typical heroin user entering treatment has shifted from mostly inner-city, minority users, the report states, to a problem that “has a more widespread geographical distribution, involving primarily white men and women in their late 20s living outside of large urban areas.”

Attorney General Eric Holder, in a March video posted to the U.S. Department of Justice website, called the nationwide heroin and prescription painkiller problem “an urgent public health crisis.”

“Addiction to heroin and other opiates — including certain prescription painkillers — is impacting the lives of Americans in every state, in every region, and from every background and walk of life — and all too often, with deadly results,” Holder said.

Clay Morris, assistant special agent in charge for the Drug Enforcement Agency in Alabama, said the

heroin problem stems from the state's markedly high use of painkillers.

"Drug trafficking is simple economic demand. Right now there is a significant demand for opiate drugs in Alabama," Morris said.

Alabama has for several years ranked consistently among the top four states when it comes to painkiller prescriptions among residents, Morris said.

In 2012, Alabama tied with Tennessee in leading the nation for the number of painkiller prescriptions, at 143 prescriptions per 100 people, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The low cost of heroin as compared to pharmaceutical painkillers on the black market is only increasing the demand for heroin, Morris said. Prescription opiates on the black market cost around \$1 per milligram, he said, but a user can get the same, or even better, high by spending much less on heroin.

Arrests and prosecutions are part of the solution to the heroin problem, Morris said, but so is treatment for addiction.

"We're not going to arrest our way out of this problem," Morris said.