



The American Opioid Epidemic in Special Populations: Five Examples

The American Opioid Epidemic is a complex and multifaceted public health crisis that has affected millions of people across the United States. This epidemic is not limited to the general population; it has also significantly impacted various special populations, including adolescents and young adults, pregnant women, and individuals with mental health conditions. Understanding the unique challenges and needs of these groups is crucial for developing effective prevention and treatment strategies. This report explores five examples of the opioid epidemic's impact on special populations, highlighting the need for targeted interventions and support.

The Importance of Adolescents and Young Adults

Adolescents and young adults are particularly vulnerable to the opioid epidemic due to their developing brains and social environments. The use of prescription opioids for pain management is a common practice, but it has led to a significant increase in misuse and addiction among this age group. The 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) indicates that 14% of high school students have engaged in opioid misuse. This statistic is a stark reminder of the scale of the problem and the need for targeted prevention efforts. Education, counseling, and access to mental health services are essential for addressing the needs of this population and reducing the risk of opioid misuse.

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Promising Approaches for Adolescents and Young Adults

Research indicates that adolescents and young adults are particularly vulnerable to substance use disorders, including opioid addiction. This vulnerability is often linked to their developing brains and the social pressures they face. Promising approaches for this demographic include comprehensive school-based prevention programs that address both cognitive and social factors. Additionally, community-based initiatives that provide early intervention and support services, such as peer support groups and family counseling, have shown positive results. Research also suggests that targeted public health campaigns and policies, such as restricting the sale of opioids to pharmacies, can help reduce the availability and misuse of these drugs among youth.

Research and Action Priorities for Adolescents and Young Adults

Key research and action priorities for adolescents and young adults include: 1) Conducting longitudinal studies to better understand the neurobiological and psychological pathways leading to substance use. 2) Evaluating the effectiveness of digital health interventions and social media-based prevention tools. 3) Strengthening school policies and teacher training to identify and support at-risk students. 4) Improving access to evidence-based treatment and recovery services for youth. 5) Advocating for and implementing policies that limit the marketing of opioids to minors and restrict access to these medications.

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