

A recent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report provided results of a study of Americans taking antidepressants from 2005 to 2008. The study came to two interesting conclusions that have a potential impact on patient safety.

First, the study determined that antidepressant use has increased 400% since 1988. Eleven percent of Americans over the age of 12 are now taking antidepressants. Any drug has risks, and more people taking a drug means that the total risk for side effects is higher. Additionally, traces of certain kinds of antidepressants have been found in the water supply, likely caused partially by improper disposal of these drugs. (Don't flush them down the toilet!) The cost of anti-depressants is an additional issue raised with the high usage of these drugs.

Even though talk therapy is a very useful tool for treating depression, less than 1/3 of patients who are taking antidepressants have met with a mental health professional in the last year. Patients reportedly prefer drugs to talk therapy, potentially because reimbursement for prescriptions is generally much simpler and cheaper than reimbursement for mental health therapy, which can be capped or may not be covered at all.

Because most antidepressants are obtained with a prescription, the higher usage of antidepressants indicates a higher rate of diagnosis of depression. While the faltering economy can take some of the blame, hormonal changes (as middle aged women are the most frequent users of antidepressants), a decreased stigma against depression, and increased awareness of the drugs, thanks to pharmaceutical marketing, have also been listed as potential causes for the increase.

Many agree that the decreased stigma towards depression is a positive step; however, the other side of the study found that only one third of people with severe depression symptoms are taking antidepressants. While many with mild depression symptoms may find relief with talk therapy or other options, American Psychiatric Association guidelines recommend medication for moderate to severe depression symptoms. This indicates that patients with severe depression may be under medicated and increases the risk for mental health problems and/or suicide. There are many possibilities for why individuals with severe depression are not getting - or seeking - the help they need. The high out of pocket cost for anti-depressants may be a barrier to some, as is the ability to receive screening for depression. Although there are certainly other roadblocks along the way, making screening easier to receive may increase the treatment rate for sufferers. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services recently announced it would be covering annual screening for depression. Hopefully this first step will result in more people getting the help they need.

Step 1. Outline

What	Problem(s)	Unbalanced antidepressant use
When	Date	Study period 2005 to 2008
	Different, unusual, unique	Struggling economy, increased marketing by pharmaceuticals
Where	State, city	Study for USA
	Task being performed	Taking antidepressant drugs

Impact to the Goals

Patient Safety	Potential for side effects from drug Risk of mental health issues, suicides
Employee Impact	Decreased request for talk therapy
Compliance	N/A
Organization	N/A
Patient Services	Difficulty with reimbursement for talk therapy Difficulty in getting screened
Environmental	Traces of antidepressant found in water supply
Property, Equip, Mtls	Cost of antidepressants
Labor, Time	?

Frequency	Antidepressant use increased 400% since 1988
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Unbalanced Antidepressants Use US, 2005-2008

Step 2. Cause Map

