

Medication Side Effects May Be Fourth-Leading Cause of Death

Researchers analyzed the results of 39 studies evaluating adverse medication effects in American hospitals carried out between 1966 and 1996. This study, reported in the Journal of the American Medical Association, showed that between 76,000 to 136,000 annual deaths from drug reactions occur, usually due to adverse reactions and side effects. Intensive-care patients are most vulnerable to adverse reactions because they are sickest and likely to be receiving numerous different medications. In some cases, patients may be receiving as many as 20 to 40 medications a day.

If the lowest death estimate was used, adverse drug reactions become the sixth-leading cause of death in the United States, higher than diabetes and pneumonia but lower than heart disease, cancer, stroke, lung disease and accidents. If the average of 106,000 deaths from adverse medication reactions was used, it would be the fourth-leading cause of death.

Studies have shown that certain types of drugs account for the majority of adverse reactions. These are antibiotics, heart medications, blood thinners and chemotherapy agents for cancer. The study's author, Bruce Pomeranz, M.D. from the University of Toronto said, "When people do die from medications, it is most likely due to failure of the kidneys or liver, disturbances on heart rhythm or destruction of the bone marrow."