



McLean leads large trial of treatment for pain-pill addiction

McLean Hospital in Belmont will lead the first large-scale study of a treatment for people addicted to pain medications such as **Vicodin** and **OxyContin**, the **National Institute on Drug Abuse** announced today. Researchers will recruit 648 participants at 11 sites, hoping to enroll both people who have taken prescription medications for pain relief but later became addicted, as well as people who take the drugs illicitly for nonmedical reasons. People interested in participating can call (617) 855-2588.

Study subjects will receive a drug called **buprenorphine naloxone**, sold as **Suboxone**, which was approved by the **U.S. Food and Drug Administration** in 2002 as an alternative to methadone treatment for people addicted to opiates such as heroin.

"The major contribution of this study is that it's focusing on this specific problem of prescription opiate dependence," **Dr. Roger Weiss**, clinical director of McLean Hospital's Alcohol and Drug Abuse Treatment Center and lead investigator for the study, said in an interview. "Most studies that have looked at opiate dependence have been done on heroin addicts with a sprinkling of people with prescription opiate dependence." Over the past five to 10 years, the number of people dependent on these prescription pain drugs has grown substantially, Weiss said.

The 2005 National Survey on Drug Use and Health found that 2.2 million Americans aged 12 or older reported being new users of pain relievers for nonmedical purposes, surpassing the 2.1 million new marijuana abusers. In 2005, more than 6 million Americans in all reported nonmedical use of prescription drugs in the past month -- more than the number abusing cocaine, heroin, hallucinogens, and inhalants, combined, according to a statement from the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

"You have adolescents and young adults who have become dependent on prescription opiates, and you also have people of middle age and older," Weiss said. "We don't really know whether the treatment strategies that we've learned are successful for heroin addicts are the same for people with prescription opiate dependence."

Weiss said the researchers also wonder whether the treatment will have the same results for the 40 percent of people who have chronic pain and are dependent on the drugs as for those who take the drugs illicitly.

Most participants will take Suboxone for between three and nine months. They will also be enrolled in one of two different behavioral therapies to test how well they work with the medication. Results are due to be reported in 2009.