



**Daily News E-Edition**   
Read the printed paper online. Free for subscribers or \$8 per month with a 14-day trial. 

Sunday, February 3 | Texas' Oldest Newspaper: [Since 1842](#)

<a href="#">Home</a>	<a href="#">News</a> ▾	<a href="#">Sports</a> ▾	<a href="#">Opinion</a> ▾	<a href="#">Blogs</a> ▾	<a href="#">Lifestyle</a> ▾	<a href="#">Communities</a> ▾	<a href="#">AP News</a> ▾	<a href="#">Services</a> ▾	<a href="#">Classifieds</a> ▾	<a href="#">Shopping</a> ▾	<a href="#">Help</a> ▾
----------------------	------------------------	--------------------------	---------------------------	-------------------------	-----------------------------	-------------------------------	---------------------------	----------------------------	-------------------------------	----------------------------	------------------------

[Help](#)      [Advanced](#) | [Browse](#) |      [Register](#) | [Sign In](#) | [Subscribe](#)

**FREE Movie Tickets**  
when you switch to  


## Not so painful truth about non chronic

**By Howard Brody**

Contributor

Published January 8, 2008

The number of people in the United States with serious, undertreated chronic pain has been estimated to be as high as 75 million. While there are various treatments for pain, many patients will achieve reasonable relief only when taking the family of drugs called opiates — relatives of opium, such as morphine.

The common view is that these drugs are terribly dangerous because there is a very high rate of addiction. The recent spate of publicity concerning abuse of prescription OxyContin has added to that fear.

Previous medical research is not of much help. Some older studies claim that prescribing opiates for chronic pain never causes addiction. Other research says that the addiction rate is as high as 32 percent. What are we to believe?

A team led by Dr. Michael F. Fleming of the University of Wisconsin has provided us



[Subscribe](#) ▶

**THE DAILY NEWS**  
Community Life.  
Delivered Daily.

**DELIVERED FOR AS LITTLE AS \$3.25 A WEEK**

with the most accurate available picture. It surveyed the offices of 235 primary-care physicians in Wisconsin, looking for patients who took opiates daily for chronic, non-cancer pain. Its members conducted detailed interviews, as well as urine drug screens, in 801 such patients, who were promised complete anonymity.

Fleming's team found a relatively high rate of illicit drug use, especially by means of the urine screens. It confirmed the impression that many people who use illicit drugs simply will not admit this to their physicians.

However, when the team looked strictly at those patients who met the official criteria for a substance-use disorder (addiction) involving opiates — that is, the standards that experts in addiction treatment use to decide who is or is not an addict — it discovered that 3.9 percent of the patients fit the criteria.

There are two points about the 3.9 percent figure. First, it is about four times the rate for the regular population, showing that there is, indeed, more addiction among these folks with chronic pain who take prescription opiates. That is, of course, worrisome. But the second point is that the rate is still low; 24 out of 25 chronic-pain patients taking opiates at any given time are not addicted to them.

Fleming's team also found out something important for physicians to keep in mind. The best guide to figuring out who these substance-abusers were was a set of questions about misuse of drugs that docs often call "red flags" for the risky patient who could be a secret addict. These "red flags," it seems, are quite helpful in identifying the occasional problem patient.

Fleming's group concluded that, for patients whose chronic pain does not respond to other treatments, the risk of addiction is not high enough to counter the value of opiate medications prescribed by primary-care physicians. To which I would say, amen.

Dr. Howard Brody, a family physician, is director of the Institute for Medical Humanities at the University of Texas Medical Branch.

---

[Save](#) | [Mail](#) | [Print](#) | [Letter](#) | [1 Comments](#)



**Subscribe ▶**

# THE DAILY NEWS

Community Life.  
Delivered Daily.

**DELIVERED FOR AS LITTLE AS \$3.25 A WEEK**



© 2008 The Galveston County Daily News. All rights reserved.

A Southern Newspapers Publication.