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VA reduces prescription opioid use by 64% during past eight years

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced today it has successfully reduced prescription opioid use in patients within the VA health care system by 64%, from more than 679,000 Veterans in fiscal year 2012 to 247,000 in fiscal year 2020 through quarter three.

VA achieved this reduction by aggressively emphasizing the safe and responsible use of prescription opioids and transforming the treatment of chronic pain using alternative therapies and treatments often in place of or in conjunction with pain medication.

“Collectively, uncontrolled pain, distress and functional impairments can reduce the quality of life for Veterans and their families, increasing the risk for overdose, substance use disorders and suicide,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “More than one third of Veterans in the VA health care system live with some form of chronic pain, and given the opioid crisis, it is our duty to do everything we can to help Veterans avoid opioid overdose and provide them with alternative pain management treatment.”

VA’s [Opioid Safety Initiative](#) also reduced the number of patients receiving opioids and benzodiazepines together by 87% since 2012, from nearly 123,000 down to nearly 16,000 Veterans, as well as reduced the number of patients on long-term opioid medications by 70% and the number of patients on very high doses of opioids by 80%.

VA Opioid Safety Initiative Key Metrics

Key Metric	Quarter 4, FY 2012: Patients (#)	Quarter 3, FY 2020: Patients (#)	Percent Change
Patients receiving opioids	679,376	247,302	64% reduction
Patients receiving opioids and benzodiazepines together	122,633	15,990	87% reduction
Patients on long-term opioids*	438,329	133,274	70% reduction
Patients dispensed greater than or equal to 100 Morphine Equivalent Daily Dose (high dose morphine)	59,499	11,764	80% reduction

*Long-term opioid patients are defined as patients who have been dispensed greater than or equal to 90 days of opioids in the reporting quarter and the previous reporting quarter.

VA has been addressing the use of opioids for more than 20 years and continually builds upon that work by employing four broad strategies to address the opioid epidemic: education, pain management, risk mitigation and addiction treatment. VA takes an interdisciplinary approach to care focused on a Veteran’s [Whole Health](#) by using non-pharmacological, [complementary pain management treatments](#), self-care, skill building, and support to transition from a biomedical to a biopsychosocial model of pain care.

VA’s initiatives respond to the challenges of pain management:

- Through its [Opioid Overdose Education & Naloxone Distribution](#) program, VA has distributed more than 416,000 prescriptions of naloxone, a life-saving medication used to block the effects of a potentially fatal opioid overdose, to Veterans as of June 30.
- Under the [Drug "Take Back" Program](#), Veterans have safely returned approximately 192.3 tons of unwanted or unneeded medications as of June 30.
- Specially trained VA pharmacists have conducted more than 55,000 outreach visits with VA staff on opioid safety, opioid overdose and naloxone distribution, and medication for opioid use disorder.
- VA health care providers also participate in state prescription drug monitoring programs and receive training on safe opioid prescribing and the opioid crisis.

Learn about the VA Opioid Safety Initiative or for more information on [VA pain management](#).

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