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The growing use of buprenorphine to address the opioid epidemic

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A new study published in JAMA Internal Medicine has calculated for the first time the overall rate of buprenorphine use in the United States, showing that filled prescriptions for the anti-addiction medication doubled between 2009 and 2018.

Buprenorphine is an opioid drug that can help individuals with opioid use disorder undergo treatment by lessening the effects of drug withdrawal. While it has some potential for misuse, it has mild effects compared to opioid painkillers in typically prescribed doses and is widely used for medication-assisted treatment.

Unlike methadone, a stronger anti-withdrawal drug that generally must be taken under supervision at a certified opioid treatment program, buprenorphine can be prescribed by any doctor who obtains a federal waiver. Proposed legislation in Congress, such as H.R. 2482, would further increase its availability by eliminating the waiver requirement.

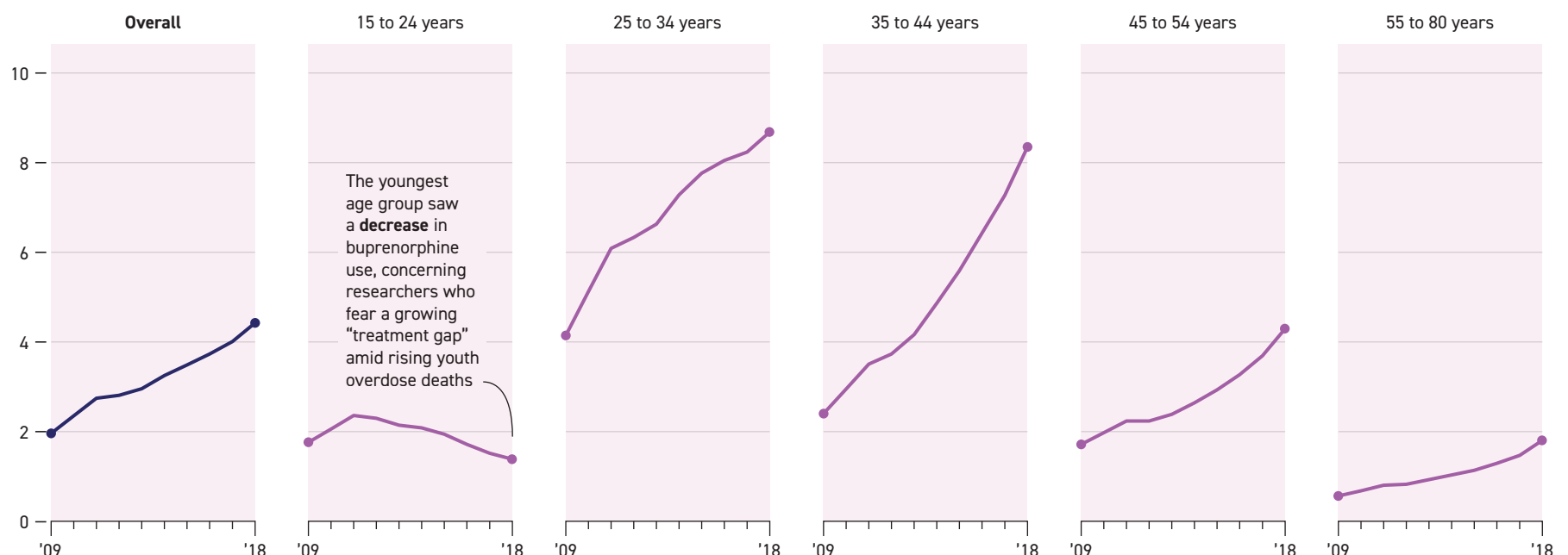
While some providers are reluctant to prescribe buprenorphine due to fear of misuse or further dependence, public health authorities widely recommend its use. According to the study, buprenorphine prescribing has rapidly increased in recent years for patients of all age groups, except for those under age 25.



Buprenorphine is sometimes sold under the brand name **Subutex**, or sold in combination with the drug naloxone under the brand name **Suboxone**.

Buprenorphine prescribing is increasingly common, except for the youngest patients

Rate of buprenorphine use per 1,000 population by age group, 2009 to 2018



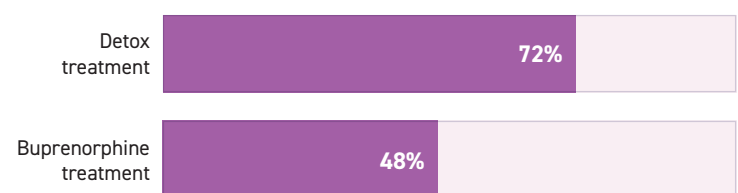
According to the study's data, in addition to being the only age group that saw a decline in buprenorphine use, young adults also tended to use buprenorphine for shorter periods of time. The authors say this is consistent with lower retention rates for young patients in treatment programs.

Opioid overdose death rates increased for all age groups during the study period, with young adults being particularly susceptible to illicit opioids such as heroin. Given these trends, the authors say the new data underscore a need to improve medication-assisted treatment services for young patients in particular.

In 2016, the American Academy of Pediatrics issued a policy statement recommending medication-assisted treatment for adolescents and young adults, calling attention to a shortage of pediatricians who prescribe buprenorphine. The organization offers an eight-hour buprenorphine training course in partnership with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, which likewise endorses buprenorphine treatment for young adults.

Buprenorphine helps young adults stay off opioids

Rate of positive urine test for opioids 12 months after treatment, for patients aged 15 to 21 years



One year after treatment began, fewer than half of buprenorphine patients **tested positive for opioid use** — a significantly higher rate of success compared to the detox treatment.