Study Finds High Number of Caucasian Women Deaths Attributed to Rx Drugs

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Scientists may have found an answer for why for the past 15 years, death rates among Caucasian women in the United States have mysteriously surged: prescription painkillers.

A new study “Even As Mortality Fell In Most US Counties, Female Mortality Nonetheless Rose In 42.8 Percent Of Counties From 1992 To 2006,” conducted by David A. Kindig and Erika R. Cheng from the University of Wisconsin–Madison, examined trends in male and female mortality rates from 1992–96 to 2002–06 in 3,140 U.S. counties. Researchers found that female mortality rates increased in 42.8 percent of counties, while male mortality rates increased in only 3.4 percent.

Several factors, including higher education levels, not being in the South or West, and low smoking rates, were associated with lower mortality rates, they concluded.

Medical care variables, such as proportions of primary care providers, were not associated with lower rates, according to the study.

Researchers increasingly track variations in health outcomes across counties in the United States, but current ranking methods do not reflect changes in health outcomes over time. These new findings suggest that improving health outcomes across the United States will require increased public and private investment in the social and environmental determinants of health—beyond an exclusive focus on access to care or individual health behavior, the report stated.

*The Washington Post* reported that although Americans’ life expectancy has steadily increased for decades, and as medicine and technology have advanced, women’s health has deteriorated. The Post noted that death rates among African-American women, meanwhile -- although they remain higher -- largely decreased over the same period that the mortality rate of Caucasian women increased.

In 1999, 3.3 per 100,000 Caucasian women died from opioid-related complications, according to the report. That number surged to 15.9 per 100,000 white women in 2011.

In general, the highest concentration of counties with rising female death rates clustered in historically impoverished regions of the Southwest, where doctors and clinics are known to write more opioid prescriptions.

Wide use and abuse of the addictive drugs is now known as “the opioid epidemic.” Deaths from painkiller overdoses among women have increased more than 400 percent since 1999, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports, compared with 265 percent among men. Nearly 48,000 women died of overdoses between 1999 and 2010.

Researchers are next examining Latino and other racial populations in regards to painkiller overdoses.  
**See Also:**  
[Opioid Related Deaths on the Rise: 70 Percent Involved Painkillers in 2011](http://www.cadca.org/resources/detail/opioid-related-deaths-rise-70-percent-involved-painkillers-2011)