



DEADLY
PILLS



One Death Every 24 Minutes

Drugs are now the No. 1 accidental killer in the U.S., with the vast majority of deaths caused by prescription meds. A look at how medicines that are now a part of everyday life can also turn families upside down forever



By **KRISTEN MASCIA**
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REMEMBERING MOM

Jace Flom, whose mother, Melanie Flom, died in April 2011 of an accidental overdose, visits Melanie's Wilber, Neb., grave site with her dad, Pete (not pictured), last September.

TOP: LEFT: ISTOCK



The statistics are staggering, the medicines powerful and highly addictive: This year more Americans will die of drug overdoses than in any other type of accident—including car crashes. In most cases, those deaths are caused by pills in many people's medicine cabinets

given to them by trusted doctors, left over from routine surgeries or prescribed to manage chronic conditions. "Prescription drug overdoses are a serious nationwide problem," says Dr. Leonard Paulozzi of the C.D.C.'s National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, "for which we haven't yet found a solution."

How did we get here?

For the millions of Americans who suffer from chronic pain, heavy-duty painkillers are the wonder drugs that help them lead more comfortable lives. But in the past 20 years, as opiate painkillers have become more routinely prescribed, the number of people dying from them—as a result of misuse or accidentally—has skyrocketed. Often those deaths are due to bad interactions with other substances: Combined with alcohol some antidepressants can cause dangerous spikes in blood pressure, and mixing pain pills with a few drinks

"can depress the brain," says Paulozzi, "and lead to death." It's a problem even the drug industry acknowledges, says Sharon Brigner, of the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America: "These medicines can be an important tool—we tell anyone we talk to that medicines save and improve lives every

day. But if misused, they can kill."

Since 1990, when the number of opioid prescriptions began to rise, such drugs have become easier to get ahold of: From 1999 to 2008 painkiller sales rose 300 percent. And there have been other contributing factors. In states like hard-hit Florida, for example, the proliferation of "pill mills"—

rogue pain clinics staffed by doctors trading prescriptions for cash—has torn towns apart. And in some places "pharm parties," where teens swap painkillers obtained legally or otherwise, have led to dozens of deaths.

While many of the most prominent faces of America's prescription drug epidemic have been famous ones—Heath Ledger, Brittany Murphy, Michael Jackson—they comprise but the tiniest fraction of victims. In the following pages, PEOPLE shares the stories of three individuals—a young mom, a teen football star

and a hero firefighter—who took pills and, tragically and accidentally, died. Their families hope that by raising their voices, they can save lives. "It hurt so much to lose her," says Krystal Uher, whose daughter Melanie died in April 2011. "We want to keep another family from going through this."

61

Average number of pharmaceutical drug deaths per day in the United States, according to the CDC

12 million

Americans 12 or older who have used prescription drugs nonmedically

90%

Increase in poisoning deaths between 1999 and 2008, many of them due to prescription drugs



A WIDOWER AT 28

"I will love our daughter more than anything else in this world," Pete Flom (with Jace in Wilber in September) wrote in a tribute after Melanie died. "What I regret most is not the things I said to you, but the things I never said."



SHE DIED TWO WEEKS AFTER HER DAUGHTER WAS BORN

MELANIE FLOM, 26
Wilber, Neb.

At the University of Missouri, top track recruit Melanie Uher hurled the discus with such force, people took notice. "That's one of the reasons her coach said she was so good," says Krystal Uher, 63. "She just gave it her all."

Alas, she applied the same high-speed approach to her partying, finding a taste for binge drinking when she was just a teen. But things took a sharp turn when, in November 2005, she was in a car crash that nearly took her life. Laid up for months with a badly broken leg and a crushed pelvis, she was given painkillers. Later she dropped out of school; over the next few years, despite taking odd jobs and doing well in a few courses at a local college, she still partied hard and got two DWIs. It was a tough time, says Uher. "There were a lot of tears."

But in September 2009, when she fell in love with Pete Flom, 28, a quiet former Marine working as a farmer near Huron, S.Dak., she seemed to find some joy again. "She was fun, outgoing, and she loved life," says Flom, who married her in a county courthouse in blue jeans and cowboy boots that November. In summer 2010 she learned she was expecting. But early in the pregnancy, frustrated

with Flom for being away on jobs, she moved back in with her parents in Nebraska. There, suffering from intense pain due to her old injuries, she asked doctors for Percocet. Uher said she knew her daughter had an addictive personality and kept a close watch on her. But at the time she seemed to be on track, coaching at a local high school and preparing for her baby's birth. "Melanie wanted to be a good mom," says Uher. "She was doing well."

Melanie was overjoyed at Jace Marie's April 2011 birth, but it didn't take away the pain, which Melanie still eased with painkillers. On April 16, after taking Lexapro, an antidepressant she'd been prescribed, drinking heavily with pals and taking hydrocodone pills from a friend, she went to bed. But when the friend went to rouse her, she

“

Jace will know that her mom loved her. This hole in our hearts will never heal”

—KRISTAL UHER, MELANIE'S MOM

wouldn't wake up. "It was a shock," says Flom, who hadn't yet met the baby and drove 18 hours to be with the Uhers. "Just a sad deal."

Now raising Jace on his own in Bemidji, Minn., close to his family, Flom says he's hung a picture of Jace and her mom above Jace's crib. At 21 months, she looks a lot like "Mel did at that age," he admits. "It's kind of uncanny." Uher says that Flom brings Jace to see her and her husband, Ray, 64. "Pete fell in love with that little girl right away," says Uher. Knowing how much her daughter wanted Jace to meet her dad, it's both wonderful and heartbreaking to see them together, adds Uher. "That baby was Melanie's life," she says. "She loved her more than anything."



A FOOTBALL STAR MAKES ONE FATAL MOVE

HARRY COHEN, 17
Burlington, N.C.

On a sweltering morning in August 2011, a few days before he died, Harry Cohen noticed the freshman girl walking in front of him with her backpack unzipped, her things about to go flying. The senior football captain at Walter M. Williams High School in Burlington, N.C., reached out to fix it—a tiny gesture, the girl later told his parents, that had a huge impact. “He’s the big senior star on campus, and he walked up and helped her,”



“I MISS HIS SMILE”
Before he died, Harry was helping his mother (in Harry’s room in September 2012) get fit. At night, she says, “we would sit on his bed and talk before he went to sleep.”

says his stepdad, Richard Kaffenberger, 44. “Through quiet acts of kindness, he touched people’s lives.” The handsome athlete who aspired to be a sports-medicine doctor was gearing up for his final high school season when, on Aug. 27, 2011, after one of the best games of his life, he reached into his grandmother’s medicine cabinet for something to soothe his aches and pains. Not one to complain after taking hard hits and, according to

his parents, too focused on his college football dreams to experiment with drugs or alcohol, during a visit to his grandmother’s house that night, he took two methadone pills prescribed for her fibromyalgia—something his parents say he’d never done before. While the two-pill dosage was fine for his grandma, it caused Harry, a wiry 150 lbs., to slip into a coma. Memories of the next day still haunt his mom’s dreams. “A vision I couldn’t get out of my head was Richard and I having to give him CPR,” says Jennifer Kaffenberger, 39, breaking up. “I want to remember the good, not the bad.”

Still reeling, the Kaffenbergers, as well as Harry’s biological dad, Harold Cohen, 39, and his five half siblings, including twins Carter and Cana, 5, “miss everything,” says Jennifer. “Cana used to sit on Harry’s back when he did his AP calculus.” Adds Richard: “The other day Carter said, ‘I want Harry back.’”

Harry’s family believes that if there’s anything to be taken from their tragedy, it’s the importance of telling kids the dangers of prescription drugs. “Harry’s life couldn’t be saved,” says Jennifer. “But maybe this could save another set of parents from losing their child.”

INSETS: TOP LEFT: COURTESY KIM STEELE; BOTTOM LEFT: COURTESY WATSON FAMILY; TOP RIGHT: COURTESY DiBERNARDO FAMILY; BOTTOM RIGHT: UW MEDICINE STRATEGIC MARKETING & COMMUNICATIONS

HE SAVED LIVES— BUT COULDN’T STOP HIS PAIN

JOEY DiBERNARDO JR., 40
Miller Place, N.Y.



We were trapped,” retired New York City firefighter Jeff Cool remembers of the wall of flame that roared at them during a massive blaze in a Bronx tenement Jan. 23, 2005. As colleagues leaped out windows, his pal Joey DiBernardo Jr. held out a rope. “He said, ‘You have a wife and kids, you go first,’” recalls Cool, who let DiBernardo lower him down. Two firefighters died that night, but thanks to DiBernardo, he and Cool survived. “He allowed me to see my kids grow up,” marvels Cool. “My kids call him Uncle Joey.”

During his own escape, DiBernardo plunged 40 feet, breaking his legs, feet and pelvis and bruising his lungs. For 18 days he lay in a coma; when he woke, depression set in as he struggled with memory loss and excruciating pain. “He said, ‘Dad, I’ve never taken a pill in my life. Now I’m taking 10,’” recalls his father, Joseph Sr., 71. “He hated it.”

A FATHER’S HEARTBREAK

After DiBernardo (inset, left, with coworker John O’Connell in 2003) endured so much, “it’s hard to accept he died accidentally,” says Joseph Sr. (in Stony Brook, N.Y., last October).



But by November 2011 things were looking up. A new girlfriend had been helping him scale back his meds with acupuncture. And the week before he died, he’d planned a romantic trip for them in Pennsylvania. Tragically, on Nov. 22 a friend found DiBernardo, 40, dead in his Long Island home due to an accidental overdose of the pain med Dilaudid and an antidepressant, Celexa. His death could have been prevented, says his dad: “People need to know to be more careful when they take their pills, and doctors need to explain the dangers of combining medications.”

TAKING A STAND



When statistics showed that increasing numbers of Washington State workers-comp filers were dying from prescription drugs each year, lawmakers were shocked. People “would leave work due to back pain. Three years later they’d be dead,” says University of Washington Division of Pain Medicine chief Dr. Alex Cahana. Cahana helped legislators devise an aggressive new law limiting the amount of opioids a patient can take daily—the first such law in the country. Cahana (above right, with colleague Dr. Jane Ballantyne of the advocacy group Physicians for Responsible Opioid Prescribing) hopes the law, which took effect last year, stems fatalities. “We’re facing a public health crisis,” he says. “We have to move forward, now.”

LESSONS FROM GRIEF

ON DEC. 5, 2010, Angie Watson, 37, found her son Connor, 13, dead in his bed after taking oxycodone he stole from a neighbor’s house. Since then she has become a fixture in schools across Utah, which has one of the highest prescription-drug death rates in the nation. “I will do anything to get the message out,” says Watson, a member of the Utah Prevention Advisory Council. Her advice? Monitor your kids, keep track of (and lock up) all of your pills and throw away any leftovers. If you suspect your child may have a problem, call 855-DRUGFREE or go to drugfree.org.

GONE TOO SOON

Angie Watson (left) and her son Connor at their home in Cottonwood Heights, Utah. “This can happen to good kids too.”

—ELAINE ARADILLAS

