

From Orlando Sentinel

Accidental prescription overdoses soaring

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

July 29, 2008

Deaths from medication mistakes at home, such as actor [Heath Ledger](#)'s accidental overdose, have risen dramatically. A new study blames the soaring home use of prescription painkillers and other drugs that were used mainly in hospitals 25 years ago. The findings, based on nearly 50 million U.S. death certificates, are in Monday's Archives of Internal Medicine.

Surge in deaths

Deaths attributed to medication mistakes at home increased from 1,132 in 1983 to 12,426 in 2004. Medication errors away from home, including hospitals (and not involving alcohol or street drugs), increased only 5 percent.

Why the increase?

Abuse of prescription drugs plays a role, but it's unclear how much. Valid prescriptions taken in error, especially narcotics such as methadone and oxycodone, account for a growing number of deaths, said experts who reviewed the study. The increases coincided with changing attitudes about painkillers among doctors, who now regard pain management as a key to healing. Multiple prescription drugs taken at once also play a part, experts said.