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Fewer Women, African Americans and Latinos Receive Opioid Treatment

The potentially lifesaving prescription drug buprenorphine is less available to women and Black and Latino people with opioid addiction.

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A study published in JAMA Network Open found that women, African Americans and Latinos do not have equal access to the Food and Drug Administration–approved prescription buprenorphine for the treatment of opioid addiction.

The study examined 3,110 filled prescriptions of buprenorphine from 72,055 emergency department visits spanning 2014 to 2020. Although access to medication increased across all groups over time, it was consistently lower for people 41 and older, women and Black and Latino individuals.

“The persistence of the disparities is frustrating. This is a truly lifesaving treatment. But it does appear that all groups are gaining access over time, which is what we want to see,” said Molly Jeffery, PhD, the scientific director for the Mayo Clinic’s Division of Emergency Medicine Research and the study’s senior author, in a news release.

Researchers say racism, mistrust of the health care system, a lack of clinicians who can prescribe buprenorphine in emergency departments and stigma around addiction all impede access to the drug.

Researchers also noted that people who are white, male or younger had much easier access to buprenorphine. “These findings are not surprising, given that patient- and system-level barriers for accessing buprenorphine often disproportionately impact vulnerable populations,” they wrote.

The FDA approved buprenorphine to treat opioid use disorder in 2002, and many studies since have confirmed that it helps treat addiction and reduce overdose deaths. In fact, a 2014 meta-analysis found that patients who received buprenorphine were 1.82 times more likely to remain in treatment compared with those who received a placebo.

“We know exactly what to do to close the gap: Get more health care providers, particularly primary care providers, involved in prescribing buprenorphine,” Jeffery said in the news release. “Mayo Clinic recognizes the importance of primary care access to buprenorphine, and our

clinicians are addressing the disparity gap by prescribing buprenorphine whenever appropriate and providing it through a primary care program and an addiction clinic."

To learn more, read "Hospitals Less Likely to Offer Opioid Programs in Communities of Color."

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