

# HEALTH MATTERS

## Oregon Sees Increased Drug Overdoses

### Highest fatalities in years

(AP) — State statistics show 229 people overdosed on heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine or a combination of them in 2008, the highest number in nine years.

But overdoses from prescription drugs accounted for most drug-related deaths in Oregon, with methadone the leading culprit. The findings

have led the state medical examiner's office to start annually tracking deaths due to prescription drugs.

In 2008, there were 131 overdose deaths from methadone, which has long been used to help curb the cravings of people addicted to drugs such as heroin.

But Dr. Karen Gunson, the

state medical examiner, said the majority of methadone overdoses occurred in people who had it prescribed for chronic pain or who had obtained the drug illegally. Not many were taking it as part of an addiction-treatment program.

Many who died were in their 30s and 40s and often taking it for headaches, backaches and other ailments, Gunson

said. In the 1990s, when methadone use was limited to addicts in treatment, the state averaged roughly 10 methadone overdoses a year.

Gunson said it's a good drug for chronic pain because it lasts a long time. The drawback is that it sometimes takes several days to have an effect. "Sometimes people don't get the immediate effect they want, so they take more than

they should."

As for illegal drugs, heroin, as usual, caused the most deaths in Oregon. But deaths from methamphetamine rose sharply last year — from 73 in 2007 to 106 in 2008 — reaching the highest level since the state began tracking drug-related deaths in 1996.

Law enforcement officials suspect the rise in methadone deaths could be due to an

unexpected level of purity, which competition for customers can lead drug makers and traffickers to increase.

"The user may be expecting a certain purity with the dose they take, when, in fact, the purity may be higher and they don't even know it," said Portland Police Capt. Mark Kruger, who heads the city police Drugs and Vice Division.

## Rise in Childhood Kidney Stones Puzzles Doctors

(AP) — Doctors are puzzling over what seems to be an increase in the number of children with kidney stones, a condition some blame on kids' love of cheeseburgers, fries and other salty foods.

Kidney stones are usually an adult malady, one that is notorious for causing excruciating pain — pain worse than childbirth. But while the number of affected children isn't huge, kids with kidney stones have been turning up in rising numbers at hospitals around the country.

At Children's Hospital of

Philadelphia, the number of children treated for kidney stones since 2005 has climbed from about 10 a year to five patients a week now, said Dr. Pasquale Casale.

Johns Hopkins Children Center in Baltimore, a referral center for children with stones, used to treat one or two youngsters a year 15 or so years ago. Now it gets calls about new cases every week, said kidney specialist Dr. Alicia Neu.

Doctors at North Shore-Long Island Jewish Medical Center reported a nearly fivefold increase in children brought in



with kidney stones between 1994 and 2005. In 2005, 61 youngsters were treated there

for stones. Dr. David Hatch at Loyola University Medical Center in Maywood, Ill., near Chicago, also has seen an increase. His youngest patient was a cranky 8-month-old girl whose mother found a pea-size kidney stone in her diaper. Eating too much salt can result in excess calcium in the urine. In children, most stones are calcium-based, and their eating habits, plus drinking too little water, puts them at risk. Plenty of water is generally recommended to help prevent kidney stones.

◀ *Matty Billemeier is just 8 years old but already has had four bouts with kidney stones. Doctors are puzzling over what seems to be an increase in the number of children with kidney stones, a condition some blame on kids' love of cheeseburgers, fries and other salt-laden food. (AP Photo)*

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## HEALTH WATCH

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**Family Caregiver Support Group** — This topic-oriented group offers a safe place to discuss the stresses, challenges and rewards of providing care to an older relative or friend. Meets the first Thursday of each month at 3 p.m. at

Legacy Good Samaritan Hospital.

**Tenderfoot Care** — Treat your feet with a soak, nail trim, buffing and massage from a licensed nurse at one of six clinics or at your home. Call 503-251-6303 for more information.

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## Record Food Stamp Use

A record 32.2 million people — one in every 10 Americans — received food stamps at latest count, the government said on Thursday, a reflection of the recession now in its 16th month.

Food stamps are the major U.S. antihunger program and help poor people buy groceries. The average benefit was \$112.82 per person in January.

The January figure marks the third time in five months that enrollment set a record.

"A weakened economy means that many more individuals are turning to SNAP/Food Stamps," said the Food Research and Action Center, an antihunger group, using the acronym for the renamed food stamp program, Supplemental

Nutrition Assistance Program.

The U.S. unemployment rate was 8.1 percent in February, the highest in 25 years. Weekly claims for jobless benefits totaled 669,000 last week, the highest in 26 years, the government said on Thursday.

Food stamp benefits get a temporary 13 percent increase,

beginning with this month, under the economic stimulus law signed by President Barack Obama. The increase equals \$80 a month for a household of four.



Food-stamp recipients use the Oregon Trail card to negotiate benefits electronically.



Dr. Billy R. Flowers

## THE SPINA COLUMN™

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### Part 14. Scoliosis Exam: The most important test your kids will take all year.

**Q:** My kids already get back-to-school check-ups. Why should I bother with yet another one?

**A:** Scoliosis, a lateral curvature of the spine, is one test probably not included in your children's back-to-school physical checkups. And yet, it is disturbingly common among teenage girls. If left untreated, scoliosis often leads to painful arthritis of the spine. But if the disorder is detected by age eight, before the adolescent growth spurt, there is better than 50% chance

for complete recovery.

**Q:** How can I tell if my daughter might have scoliosis?

**A:** The most common visible symptom is very prominent shoulder blade higher than the other. However, the best check for scoliosis is an annual pre-school checkup with a Chiropractor. The one professional best trained to

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## Hospital Return Trips Costly

(AP) — One in five Medicare patients end up back in the hospital within a month of discharge, a large study found, and that practice costs billions of dollars a year.

The findings suggest patients aren't told enough about how to take care of themselves and stay healthy before they go home, the researchers said. A few simple things — like making a doctor's appointment for de-

parting patients — can help, they said.

The study found that a surprising half of the non-surgery patients who returned within a month hadn't even seen a doctor between hospital stays.

"Hospitals put more effort into the admission process than they do into the discharge process," said Dr. Eric Coleman, one of the study's authors from the University of

Colorado in Denver.

Coleman, who runs a program to improve "hand-offs" between health care systems, said patients often have a honeymoon notion about how things will be once they're home. Then when they become confused about how to take their medicine or run into other problems, they head back to the hospital because they don't know where to turn, he said.