# Soaring UK prescription painkiller addiction driven by unregulated online sales



Soaring numbers of individuals in the UK are becoming addicted to prescription painkillers, illuminating a troubling trend exacerbated by the rise of unregulated online drug vendors. Recent data from the charity WithYou has revealed a startling doubling in the number of prescription drug addicts over the past five years, signalling a public health crisis that health officials are increasingly anxious to address. The findings have prompted calls for stricter regulations and better public awareness regarding the dangers of unsupervised drug use.

The Sunday Mirror's investigation highlights that many addictive tablets can be purchased online with alarming ease, often for the price of a fizzy drink. Health Secretary Wes Streeting has voiced concerns, suggesting that the UK is “sleepwalking into addiction.” The investigation underscored how celebrities like England footballer Dele Alli and EastEnders star Danny Dyer have fallen prey to these substances, shining a spotlight on the personal toll of this widespread issue. Alli's experience with zopiclone, initially prescribed to treat insomnia, evolved into a dependency requiring a six-week rehabilitation stint, while Dyer has candidly shared his battles with Valium during his time on set.

The scope of the issue is staggering, especially when considering that these drugs can be ordered online without prescriptions, identification checks, or safeguards meant to protect users. Reports indicate that pills such as Valium, zopiclone, and opioids can be delivered within 24 hours, often concealed behind deceptive packaging that mislabels the products to evade detection. Experts warn that the drugs sourced from these unregulated vendors can be counterfeit, posing additional risks to health and safety. One doctor emphasised the potential hazards, noting that the pills could vary tremendously in strength and toxicity, greatly increasing the likelihood of overdose or adverse reactions.

With referral rates for support services on the rise, officials are faced with an urgent need for reform. WithYou reported nearly double the number of individuals seeking help for prescription drug misuse in the past year, indicating that current trends could lead to an exponential increase in referrals if not adequately addressed. The charity suggests that the problem is not limited to the unregulated market; legitimate prescriptions are also contributing to the addiction crisis. Statistics indicate that one in four adults in the UK is prescribed a potentially addictive medication, with opiate-related issues becoming particularly prevalent.

Data reveals that 44% of those in drug treatment programmes are dealing with opiate-related issues, while deaths linked to drug poisoning reached a record high in 2023. The Office for National Statistics recorded 5,448 drug-related deaths, underscoring the gravity of the situation and the need for comprehensive reforms in prescribing practices. The rise in drug-related deaths, particularly among males, paints a stark picture of the risks associated with current prescribing trends and the illicit drug market.

The government has taken notice, with Streeting advocating for enhanced regulation on the sale of prescription medications online. Both he and experts from WithinYou call for urgent intervention to close down illegal sources of prescription drugs and improve access to solid drug testing services. These steps are deemed vital not only to curtail the unregulated market but also to foster safer prescribing practices within the healthcare system.

Echoing these calls, Barry Jonas, a former patient who dealt with a long-term addiction to codeine following inadequate treatment for a rare condition, shares his harrowing journey. His experience exemplifies the systemic issues in healthcare that historically have led to the over-prescription of pain medications without appropriate oversight. Jonas's story illustrates the cycle of dependency that many face, often stemming from the very health systems meant to provide relief.

Calls for an urgent reassessment of how prescription medications are monitored and dispensed in the UK are becoming ever more crucial. While discussions about addiction often focus on illicitsubstances, attention must urgently address the rampant misuse of prescription drugs that increasingly infiltrate the lives of many, often without adequate oversight. This highlights the pressing need not only for regulatory reforms but also for a fundamental shift in how healthcare providers approach pain management, ensuring that patients receive safe, monitored care.

As the addiction crisis deepens, there is an emerging recognition that simply targeting illegal sellers is not enough. There must be a holistic approach that involves better training for healthcare professionals, increased public awareness about the risks of certain medications, and readily accessible support systems for those struggling with dependency. The ripple effects of this crisis are profound, impacting families, communities, and the NHS, which is increasingly burdened by the consequences of addiction and associated health complications.

For many individuals experiencing pain, disordered sleep, or mental health challenges, seeking help from a GP should be the standard first step. Yet, the stigmas surrounding addiction often deter individuals from coming forward. Experts stress that it is crucial for the government to not only invest in healthcare services but also to provide platforms for early intervention that can alleviate the suffering seen within this demographic.

To protect vulnerable individuals and mitigate the crisis, the call to action from organisations like WithYou becomes a beacon for those looking for guidance. The charity’s outreach, including confidential support options, empowers individuals to address their concerns regarding medication purchased online or prescribed without adequate supervision. As this public health emergency unfolds, it becomes paramount to foster an environment where seeking help is not only possible but readily encouraged, ensuring that those affected are afforded the chance to reclaim their lives from the grips of addiction.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/soaring-numbers-brits-hooked-painkillers-35312727), [[2]](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/substance-misuse-treatment-for-adults-statistics-2023-to-2024/adult-substance-misuse-treatment-statistics-2023-to-2024-report)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/soaring-numbers-brits-hooked-painkillers-35312727), [[3]](https://www.priorygroup.com/addiction-treatment/drug-rehab/drug-abuse-statistics-uk), [[4]](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsrelatedtodrugpoisoninginenglandandwales/2023registrations?dm_i=21A8%2C8RJMM%2C7GWY7Z%2C10G7JU%2C1)
* Paragraph 3 – [[2]](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/substance-misuse-treatment-for-adults-statistics-2023-to-2024/adult-substance-misuse-treatment-statistics-2023-to-2024-report), [[5]](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/drugmisuseinenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2024)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/soaring-numbers-brits-hooked-painkillers-35312727), [[3]](https://www.priorygroup.com/addiction-treatment/drug-rehab/drug-abuse-statistics-uk), [[6]](https://www.clinicaltrialsarena.com/analyst-comment/opioid-crisis-nhs-addiction-uk/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/soaring-numbers-brits-hooked-painkillers-35312727), [[2]](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/substance-misuse-treatment-for-adults-statistics-2023-to-2024/adult-substance-misuse-treatment-statistics-2023-to-2024-report), [[4]](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsrelatedtodrugpoisoninginenglandandwales/2023registrations?dm_i=21A8%2C8RJMM%2C7GWY7Z%2C10G7JU%2C1)
* Paragraph 6 – [[2]](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/substance-misuse-treatment-for-adults-statistics-2023-to-2024/adult-substance-misuse-treatment-statistics-2023-to-2024-report), [[5]](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/drugmisuseinenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2024), [[6]](https://www.clinicaltrialsarena.com/analyst-comment/opioid-crisis-nhs-addiction-uk/)
* Paragraph 7 – [[2]](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/substance-misuse-treatment-for-adults-statistics-2023-to-2024/adult-substance-misuse-treatment-statistics-2023-to-2024-report), [[3]](https://www.priorygroup.com/addiction-treatment/drug-rehab/drug-abuse-statistics-uk)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/soaring-numbers-brits-hooked-painkillers-35312727> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/substance-misuse-treatment-for-adults-statistics-2023-to-2024/adult-substance-misuse-treatment-statistics-2023-to-2024-report> - The UK government report reveals a 7% increase in adults seeking drug and alcohol treatment services between April 2023 and March 2024, marking the highest number since 2009. The data indicates that 44% of adults in treatment were addressing opiate-related issues, with a notable rise in individuals entering treatment for powder cocaine problems, which increased by 2 percentage points to 19%. The report also highlights a significant increase in ketamine-related treatments, with numbers over eight times higher than in 2014–2015. Additionally, the report notes that nearly half of those exiting treatment successfully completed it free from dependence.
3. <https://www.priorygroup.com/addiction-treatment/drug-rehab/drug-abuse-statistics-uk> - Priory Group's statistics highlight a concerning rise in drug-related deaths in the UK, with 5,448 deaths recorded in 2023, an 11% increase from the previous year. Cocaine-related deaths surged by 30% to 1,118 in 2023, approximately ten times higher than in 2011. Opiate-related deaths, involving substances like heroin, accounted for almost half of the total drug-related deaths in 2023. The report also notes that in 2021, the UK's drug-related death rate was 5.2 per 1,000, higher than the global average of 1.6 but lower than the United States' rate of 19.5.
4. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsrelatedtodrugpoisoninginenglandandwales/2023registrations?dm_i=21A8%2C8RJMM%2C7GWY7Z%2C10G7JU%2C1> - The Office for National Statistics reports that in 2023, 5,448 deaths related to drug poisoning were registered in England and Wales, the highest number since records began in 1993. The age-standardised mortality rate for deaths related to drug poisoning has risen every year since 2012. Among males, there were 127.6 drug-poisoning deaths registered per million in 2023 (3,645 deaths), compared with 59.8 deaths per million among females (1,803 deaths).
5. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/drugmisuseinenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2024> - The Office for National Statistics' Crime Survey for England and Wales estimates that in the year ending March 2024, 9.5% of people aged 16 to 59 years (approximately 3.1 million people) reported using a drug in the last 12 months. This includes 7.6% using cannabis (around 2.5 million people) and 3.3% using a Class A drug (around 1.1 million people). Although there were no statistically significant changes compared with the year ending March 2020, levels were higher compared with ten years ago (year ending March 2013) for any drug (8.1%), cannabis (6.3%), and Class A drugs (2.5%).
6. <https://www.clinicaltrialsarena.com/analyst-comment/opioid-crisis-nhs-addiction-uk/> - Clinical Trials Arena discusses the UK's opioid crisis, highlighting a significant increase in opioid misuse and addiction leading to a surge in overdose deaths and healthcare burdens. Data from NHS England shows that in a four-year period, GPs and pharmacists have successfully prescribed 450,000 fewer opioid prescriptions in England. In March 2023, the NHS released an action plan to further reduce the overuse of opioid medications in the UK. The report also notes that by 2017–2018, one in four adults in England were prescribed opioids for chronic non-cancer pain, benzodiazepines, z-drugs, gabapentinoids, or antidepressants.
7. <https://www.dsdaily.org.uk/dailyarchive_2023/D23-Dec20.html> - The December 20, 2023, edition of DS Daily highlights that in 2022, 4,907 deaths related to drug poisoning were registered in England and Wales, equivalent to a rate of 84.4 deaths per million people. This is similar to the rate recorded in 2021 (84.0 deaths per million, 4,859 deaths). The age-standardised mortality rate for deaths related to drug poisoning has risen every year since 2012. The report also notes that nearly half of the 4,907 drug poisoning deaths in 2022 involved an opiate.