

Central Pa. insurer says its painkiller limits are putting a big dent in opioid abuse

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Capital BlueCross said on Thursday that new limits on opioid painkillers have resulted in a 42 percent decrease in the volume of opioid pills prescribed to people covered by Capital, and a 12 percent decrease in the number who are using them.

Those numbers reflect opioid use during a period between mid- and late 2017, after the Dauphin County-based health insurer imposed a seven-day limit on prescriptions for opioid painkillers such as OxyContin for most patients. The new limits, which took effect last July, also require special approval from Capital before doctors can prescribe powerful long-acting opioids.

The limits are a response to the crisis of addiction and overdoses involving opioid painkillers and heroin. They are based on medical research and recommendations from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Capital said.

Capital's medical director, Dr. Jennifer Chambers said in a news release, "Since the limitations were put into place, we have also seen a decrease in the dosage strength prescribed to our members. This is promising, because the higher the dosage of an opioid, the more likely someone is to have an adverse outcome, including the potential development of substance use disorder and addiction."

Chambers noted that 80 percent of the people who end up using heroin began with prescription painkillers. "That is why it is critical that we do our part to stem the flow of prescription opioids in our communities," she said.

Capital said it has also taken steps including promoting use of non-opioid pain remedies such as acupuncture and chiropractic care; offering personalized support to people with chronic pain; working with CVS pharmacies to identify patients who are overusing opioids and doctors who are over-prescribing them; and covering the use of medications that can help people overcome opioid addiction.

With overdoses now the leading cause of death of Americans 50 and younger, the government and insurers have been imposing limits on opioid prescriptions. That has led to a backlash from those who argue people with severe chronic pain are unfairly suffering and being penalized.

Asked about that, a Capital spokeswoman noted that exceptions to the limits are made for people with extremely painful conditions such as cancer and sickle cell anemia or are near the end of their life.

She wrote an email, "We understand that each patient faces a unique situation. That's why we have

consulted closely with a number of experts and our pharmacy benefit manager to ensure our prescription drug benefits align with industry standards and comply with government recommendations to safeguard the well-being of our members."