Use of Postpartum Prescription Pain Relievers

On average, 323 people die each year from a prescription drug overdose in Utah. From 2017 to 2018, there was an observed increase in the number of opioid-related deaths in Utah and the number of prescription opioid overdose deaths excluding heroin increased by 1.8%. Women are commonly exposed to opioids after birth, especially after a cesarean delivery. Studies have repeatedly reported on the association between initial opioid exposure and the risk of chronic opioid use and overdose deaths.

Data from a recent Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System (PRAMS) Opioid Call-back Survey indicate 25.8% of women took prescription pain relievers at some point within nine months postpartum. The most common prescription opioids taken were Hydrocodone (53.3%) and Oxycodone (45.7%). Of the women taking prescription pain relievers, most obtained them in the hospital after delivery (85.9%) and from an obstetrician/gynecologist, midwife, or prenatal care provider (78.2%). Additionally, a portion of women obtained prescription pain relievers from family members and friends without a prescription or used pain relievers left over from an old prescription (7.9%). The most frequently reported reason for taking prescription pain relievers was to relieve pain associated with birth (88.6%).

To address the need to reduce opioid exposure without adversely affecting pain management, the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecologists (ACOG) makes the following recommendation: "Because of the variation in types and intensity of pain women experience during the early postpartum period, as well as the concern that one in 300 opioid-naive patients exposed to opioids after cesarean birth will become persistent users of opioids, a stepwise approach using a multimodal combination of agents can enable obstetrician–gynecologists and other obstetric care providers to effectively individualize pain management for women in the postpartum period." For more information about the PRAMS Opioid Call-back survey, please contact Nicole Stone at nstone@utah.gov.