



A CUP OF HEALTH WITH CDC

What We're Learning About Deaths from Unintentional Injuries

State-specific Unintentional Injury Deaths — United States, 1999–2004

Recorded: November 13, 2007; posted: November 21, 2007

[Announcer] This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC – safer, healthier people.

[Matthew Reynolds] Welcome to *A Cup of Health with CDC*, a weekly broadcast of the MMWR, the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. I'm your host, Matthew Reynolds.

In a Charlie Chaplin film, slipping on a banana peel is funny, however, in real life, unintentional injuries are no laughing matter. They're the leading cause of death among people between 1 and 44 years old.

Dr. Daphne Moffett, a researcher with CDC's Injury Prevention Program says that raising awareness about the causes of these injuries is key to preventing unintentional injuries and reducing the number deaths that result. Dr. Moffett, welcome to the show.

[Dr. Moffett] Thank you, Matthew. It's very nice to be here.

[Matthew Reynolds] Dr. Moffett, your study uses the term "unintentional injuries" instead of "accidents." In everyday conversation, we usually hear, "John had such an unfortunate accident" or "Cindy was in a terrible accident." Why do you use the term "unintentional injury" instead of "accident?"

[Dr. Moffett] We use that term because we want people to understand that these are, for the most part, preventable. So, often times the public thinks of accidents as something that's unavoidable. It's something that happens in everyday life and they just come and go and you really can't do anything about them. However, what we've found is that the majority of injuries are preventable. That's why we call them unintentional injuries.

[Matthew Reynolds] What qualifies as an unintentional injury?

[Dr. Moffett] Unintentional injuries really encompass a large set of things that people refer to as accidents. So things like house fires, drownings, motor vehicle crashes, bicycle crashes, falls, slips, trips, even small children's poisonings; all of those we group or classify as unintentional injury. And the difference actually, between an unintentional injury versus an intentional injury, intentional injuries are things like violent acts. So that's the separator between the two. So any time there's an act of violence involved or suicide, that's considered an intentional injury. There's really a motive there to have that, whatever the action is, occur.

[Matthew Reynolds] What are the leading causes of death from unintentional injuries?

[Dr. Moffett] The leading causes of death are motor vehicle crashes is really the leading cause of death for unintentional injury. In addition to that, although those have really stabilized over the last several years, what we're now beginning to see though, which is driving an increase in the injuries that we've seen, are things like falls among the elderly, and, actually unintentional poisonings in the adult population, not in the children's population.

[Matthew Reynolds] To what do you attribute the poisonings?

[Dr. Moffett] The poisonings are actually coming about from the use and over use of some prescription drugs that people have managed to get a hold of and, instead of taking them the way that they've been intended, they're either taking additional amounts or they're taking their friend's prescriptions, and we've seen a great increase in those injuries, attributed to poisonings.

[Matthew Reynolds] As you look back a few years, what's made the most difference in decreasing the likelihood of unintentional injuries, overall?

[Dr. Moffett] That's a great question. Several things have happened and much of it does, I think, relate to legislation. Things like seat belt laws, mandatory seat belt laws. I mean, that was the great, really the great one, that reduced the numbers of injuries that people incurred from motor vehicle crashes. Things like child proof caps on medicine bottles; that was another one. While I think all of these have really helped to reduce unintentional injuries, we recognize that we still have a long way to go because, for example, in the states, the states all decide on their own seat belt laws. Some of them have what is called primary seat belt laws and some of them have secondary seat belt laws. So the states that have a primary seat belt law, an officer is allowed to pull over and ticket a person who is not wearing a seat belt. If the state has a secondary seat belt law, then basically, the officer is able to pull over and ticket someone for not wearing a seat belt if they're doing something else. So if they're speeding, then they'd do that, but they wouldn't necessarily write them a ticket for just not wearing their seat belt.

Matthew Reynolds] You mentioned legislation affecting the public, overall. What about the individual? What do you recommend for people to do to prevent unintentional injuries?

[Dr. Moffett] There are multiple things that people can do, and we have a whole host of things that could be done, either for kids or for adults or for the elderly. It really sort of, I guess, depends on your situation. But things like, every time you get in your car, you buckle up and you make sure your kids are buckled up and you make sure that your kids are, you know, sitting in the appropriate booster seats or the child safety seats, whatever is appropriate for their age. Making certain that, if you have a pool, the pool is fenced in. Making sure that your kids are wearing, you know, life vests or life jackets,

personal floatation devices if they're swimming out in open water and that you've got somebody who's supervising them. Things like making sure all of your medicines are put in a place where your kids can't get them. And it's amazing what small children can get to in your house, so, and making sure that cleaning agents are all put away, as well. And in terms of for older adults, making sure that there are no slip, trip, fall hazards for them. So, any throw rugs or loose cords or making sure there's appropriate lighting for the stairs. All of those types of things, which are really sort of everyday things that a person can do on their own, that's inexpensive and a real simple thing to do and that can prevent a lot of unintentional injury.

[Matthew Reynolds] Based on the reports that you receive and the studies that you've been conducting, have you noticed any trends in the frequency of unintentional injuries or the number of deaths that are resulting from them?

[Dr. Moffett] In the report that we released recently, we looked at data between the years of 1999 and 2004, and what we found was an overall 7 percent increase in unintentional injury rates. The reasons for the national increase really have to do with an increase in falls among the elderly and the poisonings, the unintentional poisonings. Those are really driving those rates. For individual states, they would really need to look at their own data to make a determination as to what it is that's happening within their states that may have changed their rates, whether they went up or down.

[Matthew Reynolds] What is CDC doing to reduce the rate of unintentional injuries?

[Dr. Moffett] CDC works with our state partners through several different core injury programs in order to assist them with developing state-based injury prevention programs. And, in addition to that, we do research, obviously here at CDC, to investigate these problems and how can we address these problems. So, for example, with the falls among the older adults, we will be putting out, at the beginning of the year, a booklet that people should be able to download from the internet which will list effective interventions to reduce falls among older adults. So these have already been tested; they've been shown to work. So the states can then look at those and determine whether or not those can be turned into a program they could use within their states to help reduce falls among the elderly.

[Matthew Reynolds] You mentioned earlier about child seats for cars, life jackets, that sort of thing. If parents, for example, are listening to this and wondering, "Do I have it installed correctly?", "Do I know how to put the life jacket on correctly?", "Put the bicycle helmet on correctly?" What do you recommend for them? Where should they go for more information and more information about unintentional injuries in general?

[Dr. Moffett] There are several places that people can look for information about how to prevent unintentional injury. What I'd like to do is give you the web address for CDC's injury center first and then address some local places people can look. So the web address is www.cdc.gov/injuryviolencesafety, all one word. And, if you visit this website, this gives information about the programs that we have here. In addition to that, there

are several local places that are really good for communities to go to get that information. Things like the fire houses. Firemen are very used to going into people's houses and helping them with installation of smoke alarms and smoke detectors and they can explain how to install them correctly and remind people about changing their batteries. In addition, you can take your car to the fire house and they will help you install your children's safety seats. So if you're not sure how to do it, that's a great place to go. Also, most hospitals have someone who can help with that, as well. So those are really good places to look for that type of information.

[Matthew Reynolds] Dr. Moffett, thank you for being here and sharing this information with us today.

[Dr. Moffett] It's my pleasure, Matthew. Thanks for asking.

[Matthew Reynolds] That's it for this week's show. Don't forget to join us next week. Until then, be well. This is Matthew Reynolds for *A Cup of Health with CDC*.

To access the most accurate and relevant health information that affects you, your family and your community, please visit www.cdc.gov.