Are painkillers addictive? My friends at university use them a lot

Q Dear Counsellor, Are painkillers addictive? I have noticed that many of my friends at university use them a lot. They take codeine, morphine and tramadol. One of them had to be admitted recently after taking an overdose of ramadol. They say they need them for chronic pain, but I doubt that.

Ajambo, Kamuli



A person holding medicine and a glass of water ready to swallow. Doctors warn that painkillers can be addictive and may cause side effects to some patients

BREAK FREE with OSCAR BAMUHIGIRE

A: Dear Ajambo,
Not all painkillers have the potential to be addictive. There are certain types of painkillers, like Tramadol, which your friend took, that carry with them the risk of addiction, but sometimes people have no option, but to take them because of pain.

A study published this year found that millions of people are addicted to, or are at risk of becoming dependent on, prescription opioid painkillers, like Tramadol.

According to the study, one in three people taking prescribed opioid analgesics, which include drugs like codeine, tramadol, oxycodone and morphine, show symptoms of being dependent on them, while one in 10 becomes fully addicted to the drugs.

The research, which was led by academics from the University of Bristol, was published in the journal *Addiction*.

It also showed that one in eight people is at risk of prescription opioid misuse.

These types of painkillers, though useful for short-term acute pain and managing end-of-life care, may not be suitable for chronic pain.

"Opioid painkillers are not effective in the management of long-term pain," Kyla Thomas, a professor of public health medicine at the University of Bristol and lead author of the study, said.

"They are associated with many harms. Our findings show that opioid misuse is much more common among patients taking them for long-term pain than perhaps people imagine," Thomas added.

A quarter of adults globally suffer from chronic pain and about a third of these are estimated to be prescribed opioid analgesics. Because of the addictive nature of these drugs, one has to be very cautious in their use. Prof. Kamila Hawthorne, chair of the Royal College of General Practitioners (GPs), said: "Chronic pain can cause untold misery for patients, and GPs want to help them manage this safely and effectively. Opioid painkillers can be an appropriate and effective intervention for some patients - particularly those suffering from acute pain, but GPs will be acutely aware of how addictive they can be, and that they can also cause other unpleasant side effects."

Prof. Kamila added that if opioids are to be prescribed, GPs will always aim to prescribe the smallest possible dose for the shortest possible time, in line with clinical guidelines - and data from last year showed that prescriptions for opioids in primary care fell by 8% in less than three years.