



pain. Instead, he says his goal is to help patients to "be active and functional without escalating their dosage."

Krista Smith, 39, takes the narcotic Vicodin to relieve the lingering pain caused by a car accident 23 years ago, when she was burned on over 80% of her body. But Smith uses them sparingly - making a bottle of 50 pills last four months - to avoid becoming addicted.

"I deal with pain every day," says Smith, a mother of two from Timberville, Va. "I've been through so much pain that I guess I can tolerate a lot."

Many doctors say that preventing abuse requires a national effort.

Although 39 states have electronic databases to track narcotics prescriptions, none share that information fully

with other states, Manchikanti says. So patients who get narcotics in one state may be able to cross the state line to get more.

A nationwide system of electronic medical records also would help, Zvara says, because doctors in different hospitals and clinics would easily be able to measure how many narcotics doses a patient has had.

Experts say there are many reasons why the public - and even doctors - don't realize the seriousness of the problem. Unlike crack, prescription painkillers generally aren't associated with increased street crime or violence, Zvara says.

And Volkow notes that many people underestimate how lethal painkillers can

be, assuming that anything prescribed by a doctor must be safe.

Experts say Jones was lucky to get help before it was too late.

Jones says she tried and failed to quit the drug on her own. Although she never spent more than about \$50 at a time buying extra pills from "acquaintances of acquaintances," Jones says she realized she was becoming dependent on them.

She eventually kicked the habit through a UNC program and has been clean for two years. She now takes a methadone-like drug for pain.

"I can't tell you how good it feels to be off of it," Jones says. "I never dreamed it could be so addictive or dangerous. It's something you don't know about until you live it."