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# SAFETY ADVICE FOR PATIENTS & FAMILY MEMBERS

## WHAT ARE OPIOIDS?

Opioids include illicit drugs such as heroin and prescription medications used to treat pain such as morphine, codeine, methadone, oxycodone, hydrocodone, fentanyl, hydromorphone, and buprenorphine.

Opioids work by binding to specific receptors in the brain, spinal cord, and gastrointestinal tract. In doing so, they minimize the body's perception of pain. However, stimulating the opioid receptors or "reward centers" in the brain can also trigger other systems of the body, such as those responsible for regulating mood, breathing, and blood pressure.

A variety of effects can occur after a person takes opioids, ranging from pleasure to nausea and vomiting, from severe allergic reactions (anaphylaxis) to overdose, in which breathing and heartbeat slow or even stop.

Opioid overdose can occur when a patient misunderstands the directions for use, accidentally takes an extra dose, or deliberately misuses a prescription opioid or an illicit drug such as heroin.

Also at risk is the person who takes opioid medications pre-scribed for someone else, as is the individual who combines opioids—prescribed or illicit—with alcohol, certain other medications, and even some over-the-counter products that depress breathing, heart rate, and other functions of the central nervous system<sup>5</sup>.

## PREVENTING OVERDOSE

If you are concerned about your own use of opioids, don't wait! Talk with the health care professional(s) who prescribed the medications for you. If you are concerned about a family member or friend, urge him or her to talk to whoever prescribed the medication.

Effective treatment of opioid use disorder can reduce the risk of overdose and help a person who is misusing or addicted to opioid medications attain a healthier life. An evidence-based practice

for treating opioid addiction is the use of United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA)-approved medications, along with counseling and other supportive services. These services are available at SAMHSA-certified and DEA-registered opioid treatment programs (OTPs).<sup>28,29</sup> In addition, physicians who are trained to provide treatment for opioid addiction in office-based and other settings with medications such as buprenorphine/naloxone and naltrexone may be available in your community.<sup>30</sup>

## IF YOU SUSPECT AN OVERDOSE

*An opioid overdose requires immediate medical attention.* An essential first step is to get help from someone with medical expertise as soon as possible. *Call 911 immediately* if you or someone you know exhibits any of the symptoms listed below. All you have to say: "Someone is unresponsive and not breathing." Give a clear address and/or description of your location.

Signs of **OVERDOSE**, which is a life-threatening emergency, include the following:

- The face is extremely pale and/or clammy to the touch.
- The body is limp.
- Fingernails or lips have a blue or purple cast.
- The person is vomiting or making gurgling noises.
- He or she cannot be awakened from sleep or is unable to speak.
- Breathing is very slow or stopped.
- The heartbeat is very slow or stopped.

Signs of **OVERMEDICATION**, which may progress to overdose, include:

- Unusual sleepiness or drowsiness.
- Mental confusion, slurred speech, or intoxicated behavior.
- Slow or shallow breathing.
- Extremely small "pinpoint" pupils.
- Slow heartbeat or low blood pressure.
- Difficulty in being awakened from sleep.

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## WHAT IS NALOXONE?

Naloxone is an antidote to opioid overdose. It is an opioid antagonist that is used to reverse the effects of opioids. Naloxone works by blocking opiate receptor sites. It is not effective in treating overdoses of benzodiazepines (such as Valium®, Xanax®, or Klonopin®), barbiturates (Seconal® or Fiorinal®), clonidine, Elavil®, GHB, or ketamine. It is also not effective in treating overdoses of stimulants such as cocaine and amphetamines (including methamphetamine and Ecstasy). However, if opioids are taken in combination with other sedatives or stimulants, naloxone may be helpful.

**IMPORTANT SAFETY INFORMATION.** Naloxone may cause dizziness, drowsiness, or fainting.

These effects may be worse if it is taken with alcohol or certain medicines. For more information, see

<http://www.fda.gov/drugs/drugsafety/postmarketdrugsafetyinformationforpatientsandproviders/ucm472923.htm>.

## REPORT ANY SIDE EFFECTS

Get emergency medical help if you or someone has any signs of an allergic reaction after taking naloxone, such as hives,

difficulty breathing, or swelling of your face, lips, tongue, or throat.

*Call your doctor or 911 at once* if you have a serious side effect such as:

- Chest pain, or fast or irregular heartbeats.
- Dry cough, wheezing, or feeling short of breath.
- Sweating, severe nausea, or vomiting.
- Severe headache, agitation, anxiety, confusion, or ringing in your ears.
- Seizures (convulsions).
- Feeling that you might pass out.
- Slow heart rate, weak pulse, fainting, or slowed breathing.

If you are being treated for opioid use disorder (either an illicit drug like heroin or a medication prescribed for pain), you may experience the following symptoms of opioid withdrawal after taking naloxone:

- Feeling nervous, restless, or irritable.
- Body aches.
- Dizziness or weakness.
- Diarrhea, stomach pain, or mild nausea.
- Fever, chills, or goosebumps.
- Sneezing or runny nose in the absence of a cold.

This is not a complete list of side effects, and others may occur. Talk to your doctor about side effects and how to deal with them.

## STORE NALOXONE IN A SAFE PLACE

Naloxone is usually handled and stored by a health care provider.

If you are using naloxone at home, store it in a locked cabinet or other space that is out of the reach of children or pets.

## SUMMARY: HOW TO AVOID OPIOID OVERDOSE

1. Take medicine only if it has been prescribed to you by your doctor.
2. Do not take more medicine or take it more often than instructed.
3. Call a doctor if your pain gets worse.
4. Never mix pain medicines with alcohol, sleeping pills, or any illicit substance.
5. Store your medicine in a safe place where children or pets can- not reach it.
6. Learn the signs of overdose and how to use naloxone to keep it from becoming fatal.
7. Teach your family and friends how to respond to an overdose.
8. Dispose of unused medication properly.

### READ MORE AT

<http://www.fda.gov/drugs/drugsafety/postmarketdrugsafetyinformationforpatientsandproviders/ucm472923.htm>.

# RECOVERING FROM OPIOID OVERDOSE

## RESOURCES FOR OVERDOSE SURVIVORS AND FAMILY MEMBERS

**S**urvivors of opioid overdose have experienced a life-changing and traumatic event. They have had to deal with the emotional consequences of overdosing, which can involve embarrassment, guilt, anger, and gratitude, all accompanied by the discomfort of opioid withdrawal. Most need the support of family and friends to take the next steps toward recovery.

While many factors can contribute to opioid overdose, it is almost always an accident. Moreover, the underlying problem that led to opioid use—most often pain or substance use disorder—still exists and continues to require attention.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, the individual who has experienced an overdose is not the only one who has endured a traumatic event. Family members often feel judged or inadequate because they could not prevent the overdose. It is important for family members to work together to help the overdose survivor obtain the help that he or she needs.

## FINDING A NETWORK OF SUPPORT

As with any disease, it is not a sign of weakness to admit that a person or a family cannot deal with the trauma of overdose without help. It takes real courage to reach out to others for support and to connect with members of the community to get help.

Health care providers, including those who specialize in treating substance use disorders, can provide structured, therapeutic support and feedback.

If the survivor's underlying problem is pain, referral to a pain specialist may be in order. If it is addiction, the patient should be referred to an addiction specialist for assessment and treatment, either by a physician specializing in the treatment of opioid addiction, in a residential treatment program, or in a federally certified Opioid Treatment Program (OTP). In each case, counseling can help the individual manage his or her problems in a healthier way. Choosing the path to recovery can be a dynamic and challenging process, but there are ways to help.

In addition to receiving support from family and friends, overdose survivors can access a variety of community-based organizations and institutions, such as:

- Health care and behavioral health providers.
- Peer-to-peer recovery support groups such as Narcotics Anonymous.
- Faith-based organizations.
- Educational institutions.
- Neighborhood groups.
- Government agencies.
- Family and community support programs.

# RECOVERING FROM OPIOID OVERDOSE

## RESOURCES

Information on opioid overdose and helpful advice for overdose survivors and their families can be found at:

### **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)**

- National Helpline 1-800-662-HELP (4357) or 1-800-487-4889 (TDD—for hearing impaired)
- Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator: <https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov> to search by address, city, or zip code
- Buprenorphine Treatment Physician Locator: <http://www.samhsa.gov/medication-assisted-treatment/physician-program-data/treatment-physician-locator>
- State Substance Abuse Agencies: <https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/TreatmentLocator/faces/about.jspx>

### **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):**

<http://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/epidemic>

### **National Institutes of Health (NIH), National Center for Biotechnical Information:**

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov>

### **Partnership for Drug-Free Kids:**

<http://www.drugfree.org/join-together/opioid-overdose-antidote-being-more-widely-distributed-to-those-who-use-drugs>

### **Project Lazarus:**

<http://www.projectlazarus.org>

### **Harm Reduction Coalition:**

<http://www.harmreduction.org>

### **Overdose Prevention Alliance:**

<http://www.overdosepreventionalliance.org>

### **Toward the Heart:**

<http://www.towardtheheart.com/naloxne>