

SAMHSA  
Opioid Overdose  
**TOOLKIT:**  
Safety Advice for Patients  
& Family Members



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### *Also see the other components of this Toolkit:*

- ★ Facts for Community Members
- ★ Five Essential Steps for First Responders
- ★ Information for Prescribers
- ★ Recovering from Opioid Overdose:  
Resources for Overdose Survivors & Family Members

## WHAT ARE OPIOIDS?

Opioids include drugs such as heroin and prescription medications used to treat pain such as morphine, codeine, methadone, oxycodone (Oxycontin, Percodan, Percocet), hydrocodone (Vicodin, Lortab, Norco), fentanyl (Duragesic, Fentora), hydromorphone (Dilaudid, Exalgo), and buprenorphine (Suboxone).

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. Stimulating the opioid receptors or "reward centers" in the brain also can 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, vomiting, 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 prescribed 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 [1].

## 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 do so as well.

Effective treatment of opioid use disorders 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 FDA-approved medications, along with counseling and other supportive services. These services are available at SAMHSA-certified and DEA-registered opioid treatment programs (OTPs) [2,3]. 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 [4].

## 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:

- Face is extremely pale and/or clammy to the touch
- Body is limp
- Fingernails or lips have a blue or purple cast
- The patient 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
- Heartbeat is very slow or stopped.

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

- Unusual sleepiness or drowsiness
- Mental confusion, slurred speech, intoxicated behavior
- Slow or shallow breathing
- Pinpoint pupils
- Slow heartbeat, low blood pressure
- Difficulty waking the person from sleep

# SAFETY ADVICE FOR PATIENTS & FAMILY MEMBERS

## WHAT IS NALOXONE?

Naloxone (Narcan) 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 also is 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 you take it with alcohol or certain medicines. Use naloxone with caution. Do not drive or perform other possibly unsafe tasks until you know how you react to it.

If you experience a return of symptoms (such as drowsiness or difficulty breathing), **get help immediately.**

## REPORT ANY SIDE EFFECTS

Get emergency medical help if you have 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 like you might pass out; or
- Slow heart rate, weak pulse, fainting, or slowed breathing.

If you are being treated for dependence on opioid drugs (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; or
- 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 cannot 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** [www.drugs.com/cdi/naloxone.html](http://www.drugs.com/cdi/naloxone.html).

## REFERENCES

1. BMJ Evidence Centre. Treatment of opioid overdose with naloxone. *British Medical Journal*. Updated October 23, 2012. [Accessed March 24, 2013, at [www.bmj.com](http://www.bmj.com)]
2. National Treatment Referral Helpline 1-800-662-HELP (4357) or 1-800-487-4889 (TDD for hearing impaired)
3. National Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator: [www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov/TreatmentLocator](http://www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov/TreatmentLocator) to search by state, city, county, and zip code
4. Buprenorphine Physician & Treatment Program Locator: [www.buprenorphine.samhsa.gov/bwns\\_locator](http://www.buprenorphine.samhsa.gov/bwns_locator)

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Division of Pharmacologic Therapies, Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 1 Choke Cherry Road, Rockville, MD 20857.



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