

# Opioid Misuse, Addiction and Overdose

Opioid overdose is a crisis, with more than 47,000 people dying from opioid-related overdoses in 2017 alone. People who take opioids can develop a dependency on them in just days, even when taken for a legitimate medical issue. Dependency, while not the same as having an opioid use disorder (the medical term for opioid addiction), can lead to developing an opioid addiction.

Opioids are prescribed for legitimate reasons. Many people need them to help recover from surgery or manage pain from an injury. If you receive an opioid prescription, you might notice that it's a low-dosage pill in a quantity that will last just a few days. That's because opioid misuse often starts with people taking opioids for longer than they need them. Misuse is taking medication for a purpose other than why it was prescribed, or using medication that was not prescribed for you.

If you have opioids in your home, keep them in a locked cabinet or pill safe so no one else has access to them. If you have leftover opioids, dispose of them safely. Do not throw them in the trash or give them to someone else. Instead, ask your doctor or pharmacist for the closest safe disposal site or option.

Because opioid misuse and addiction are so common, we all share a responsibility to keep an eye on our co-workers. If you notice a co-worker exhibiting odd behavior or seeming sick, ask them what's wrong or talk to your supervisor about it. Co-workers may be endangering themselves or others if they are under the influence of opioids or other drugs on the job. It's one more way we can help keep each other safe.

## Signs of Opioid Misuse

It can be hard to tell if you or someone you know is misusing opioids. If you are taking opioids, watch for the following signs of misuse:

- You think about taking or are taking opioids more frequently or in a higher dose than currently prescribed
- You have difficulty cutting down or stopping use of opioids, even when they are no longer needed to treat pain
- You continue to use opioids despite negative consequences in your personal life or job
- You get opioids from more than one source – for example, going to more than one doctor or taking a friend's leftover prescription
- You crush, chew, snort, or inject opioids to increase their effect

Watch for the following signs of misuse in other people:

- Failure to fulfill major life responsibilities, such as work, school or financial obligations
- Withdrawal from important relationships or activities
- Legal consequences such as drug possession arrest or DUI
- Increased physical or psychological changes or problems

Though these signs do not automatically mean that someone is misusing opioids, they indicate that something bad may be happening in their life. Consider reaching out. Ask them if something's wrong, or if comfortable doing so, contact their supervisor or family to tell them you have a concern.

*(continued)*

## Signs of Opioid Overdose

Opioids are used to treat pain, but in doing so, they also depress your breathing. Taking too high a dose of opioids could cause you to stop breathing altogether – an opioid overdose. The signs of an overdose include some or all of these<sup>1</sup>:

- Falling asleep or losing consciousness
- Being non-responsive to wake up attempts
- Slow, shallow, or stopped breathing
- Choking or gurgling sounds
- Limp body
- Pale, blue, grayish or cold, clammy skin
- Small “pinpoint” pupils

If you think someone has overdosed, call 911 right away. Try to wake them up by rubbing your knuckles up and down their breastbone and asking them to respond to you. If they aren’t able to respond, administer naloxone – the temporary opioid overdose reversal medication – from our first aid supplies. Naloxone only works on opioid overdoses, not on overdoses of other drugs. Importantly, naloxone will not harm a person who is not overdosing on opioids.

If naloxone is given in time, it can take 2 to 3 minutes to restore breathing. In some cases, you may need more than one dose of naloxone – this is common. Victims may wake up before paramedics arrive, but they still need to be checked out – don’t let the victim leave.

Naloxone’s overdose reversal is temporary and wears off in 20 to 90 minutes. As it wears off, breathing may slow and the overdose may return, depending on the type and amount of an opioid the victim ingested. If this happens, another dose of naloxone can be given. Side effects of naloxone administration are rare.

## Overcoming the Stigma of Opioid Overdose

Naloxone saves lives. Some people are uncertain about administering naloxone for a variety of reasons, but think of it this way. You wouldn’t hesitate to use an EpiPen to save a person’s life if they ate a strawberry, even though they were allergic. Using naloxone to save someone’s life gives them a chance to take control of their opioid use disorder – to enter treatment and find recovery, and to lead a healthy, fulfilling life after opioid addiction. If they die, they can’t recover. Naloxone gives them that second chance.

*Medical advice and information in this document were approved by NSC physicians who advise the Council on our substance use harm initiatives. These doctors also are members of the [NSC Physician Speakers Bureau](#).*

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/prevention/index.html>