



# Opioid education overview

## What is an opioid?

Opioids are a class of drugs that include pain relievers, such as hydrocodone, oxycodone, and morphine. Prescription opioids treat pain for certain health conditions, after surgery, or a severe injury.

## The “opioid crisis”

Because opioids are highly effective for treating pain, they have been widely prescribed. Over time, they were found to be highly addictive. Addiction can cause uncontrollable cravings, inability to control drug use, inability to meet daily life obligations, or harming oneself or others.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reports more than 100 people die every day in the U.S. from opioid overdose. In 2017, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) declared the opioid crisis a public emergency. The opioid crisis continues to affect many people. Data from the CDC shows the following:

- 21 to 29 percent of patients prescribed opioids for chronic pain misuse them.
- Between 8 and 12 percent of patients develop an opioid use disorder.
- If you are using opioids regularly, you are more likely to develop a dependency on them.
- An estimated 4 to 6 percent of patients who misuse prescription opioids transition to heroin.
- About 75 percent of new heroin users report a history of abusing opioids.

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## Avoiding accidental overdose

Take only the amount prescribed. Opioids affect the part of the brain that regulates breathing. High opioid doses can cause slow breathing and even death. If you don't think your medication is working effectively, contact your doctor.

**Unless advised by your doctor, do not combine opioids with alcohol, muscle relaxants, stimulants, or sedatives.** They can cause dangerous interactions or fatal overdoses. A few examples of these drugs are:

- Benzodiazepines (Ativan/lorazepam, Xanax/alprazolam, Valium/diazepam)
- Muscle relaxants (Flexeril/cyclobenzaprine), Soma/carisoprodol, Robaxin/methocarbamol)
- Sleep aids (Ambien/zolpidem, Lunesta/eszopiclone, Sonata/zaleplon)
- Other prescription opioids (Opana/oxycodone, Duragesic/fentanyl, Dilaudid/hydromorphone)
- Stimulants (methamphetamine)

**Know the signs of opioid overdose.** Even if you are not sure, treat the situation like an overdose—you could save a life. **Call 911** or get medical care immediately. Do not leave the person alone.

Signs may include any of the following:

- Small, constricted "pinpoint pupils"
- Falling asleep or loss of consciousness
- Slow, shallow breathing
- Choking or gurgling sounds
- Limp body
- Pale, blue, or cold skin

## Side effects

Let your doctor know if you experience opioid side effects, such as:

- Tolerance (needing to take more medication for the same pain relief)
- Physical dependence (symptoms of withdrawal, such as an increased heart rate, sleepiness, and nausea, when a medication is stopped)
- Increased sensitivity to pain
- Constipation

- Sleepiness, dizziness, and confusion
- Nausea, vomiting, and dry mouth

## Alternative treatments

Talk with your doctor about all your options for pain relief. In addition to alternative medications, a nondrug treatment or therapy may be effective for reducing your pain. Nondrug options may include:

- Acupuncture
- Massage therapy
- Chiropractic manipulation
- Exercise or physical therapy
- Relaxation therapy
- Treatment for depression

## Safe storage and disposal

Be sure to store your medication, especially opioids, in a safe place and out of reach of others. Dispose of any unused medication safely through a disposal location. Do not put medications in the trash or flush them down the toilet. If you are not sure where to take leftover medication, ask your pharmacy, or use the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) disposal location online search tool at [Apps.DeaDiversion.USDOJ.gov/pubdispsearch](https://Apps.DeaDiversion.USDOJ.gov/pubdispsearch).

Additionally, the DEA website includes information about the National Prescription Take Back Day ([DEA.gov/takebackday](https://DEA.gov/takebackday)) with the approved collection centers.

## Free confidential help

Get free and confidential information in English and Spanish 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

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

**Toll-free helpline:** 800-662-4357  
or TTY: 800-487-4889

**Website:** [FindTreatment.samhsa.gov](https://FindTreatment.samhsa.gov)

Sources:

National Institutes of Health (NIH), National Institute on Drug Abuse, [Drugabuse.Gov/Drugs-abuse/Opioids](https://Drugabuse.Gov/Drugs-abuse/Opioids).  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), [CDC.gov/Drugoverdose](https://CDC.gov/Drugoverdose).