# Understanding opioid overdose

If someone you know is struggling with opioids, it can be overwhelming to know how to help. Below please find important information to help you form a deeper understanding of what opioids are what you can do to help in the case of an opioid overdose.

## What are opioids?

Opioids are drugs that include the illegal drug heroin, and pain relievers available legally by prescription, such as fentanyl, oxycodone (OxyContin®), hydrocodone (Vicodin®), codeine, morphine, and many others.

Opioids can cause side effects such as drowsiness, mental fog, nausea, and constipation. They are also sometimes abused which can lead to overdose. In an overdose, opioids may cause a person’s breathing to slow or stop, which can lead to death.

## Opioid overdose

Opioid overdose can happen:

* When a patient misunderstands the directions for use, accidentally takes an extra dose, or deliberately misuses a prescription opioid or an illicit drug like heroin
* If a person takes opioid medications prescribed for someone else
* If a person mixes opioid with other medications, alcohol, or over-the-counter drugs

Opioid overdose is life-threatening and requires immediate emergency attention. Recognizing the signs of opioid overdose is essential to saving lives.

* Call 9-1-1 if a person exhibits these symptoms of opioid overdose:
* Their face is extremely pale and/or feels clammy to the touch
* Pinpoint pupils
* Their body goes limp
* Their fingernails or lips have a purple or blue color
* They start vomiting or making gurgling noises
* They cannot be awakened or are unable to speak
* Their breathing or heartbeat slows or stops

## What is Naloxone (Narcan®)?

Naloxone (Narcan®) is an opioid antagonist medication (blocks the effects of opioids) that is used to reverse an opioid overdose. It is approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). It blocks opioid receptor sites, reversing the effects of the overdose. Naloxone is administered when a patient is showing signs of opioid overdose. The medication can be given by nasal spray, intramuscular (into the muscle) injection, subcutaneous (under the skin) injection, or intravenous (IV) injection.

A provider can prescribe naloxone to patients who are considered at risk for opioid overdose. Candidates for naloxone are those who:

* Take high doses of opioids for long-term management of chronic pain
* Receive rotating opioid medication regimens
* Have been discharged from emergency medical care following opioid poisoning or intoxication
* Take certain extended-release or long-acting opioid medication
* Receiving treatment for opioid use disorder, including recovery medications, detoxification, or abstinence programs

Naloxone is safe to use even if the patient has not overdosed on opioids, it will not have an effect if opioids are not in the patient’s system. Pregnant women can be safely given naloxone in limited doses under the supervision of a provider.

Naloxone is effective if opioids are misused in combination with other sedatives or stimulants. It is not effective in treating overdoses of benzodiazepines or stimulant overdoses involving cocaine and amphetamines without opioids.

Here is a link to a video on Naloxone: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WkWXX5DPmpg>

## Preventing opioid overdose

The following tips can help patients and their loved ones avoid opioid overdose:

* Take medicine as prescribed by your doctor
* Do not take more medication or take it more often than instructed
* Never mix pain medicines with alcohol, sleeping pills, or illicit substances
* Store medicine safely where children or pets cannot reach it
* Dispose of unused medication promptly