

Opioids and Opioid Overdose

Opioids include some prescription pain medications, heroin, and fentanyl. Opioids can cause a person's breathing to slow down or stop. If someone takes more opioids than their body can handle, they can lose consciousness, stop breathing, and die. This is called an opioid overdose. An overdose can happen at once or over time.



Opioid Overdose Risks

- **Restarting opioid use after a break or change in type/dose.** This includes after leaving jail or prison, some types of drug treatment, and hospital admissions. *Tolerance can decrease quickly, even in a matter of days.*
- **Mixing opioids with other sedating substances** such as *alcohol, sleep aids, or benzodiazepines* (“benzos” like Valium and Xanax). Use one drug at a time or use less of each drug. Start low and go slow.
- **Taking prescription pain medication in higher doses and/or more often than prescribed**
- **Taking someone else’s pain medication**
- **Using heroin or any drug not obtained from a pharmacy or cannabis dispensary,** due to unknown purity or origin
- **Heart, kidney, or lung disease,** which may affect the body’s ability to fight back against an overdose
- **Having overdosed in the past**
- **Using alone:** you can’t give yourself naloxone during an overdose. Try to use with a friend or around other people.



Signs of Opioid Overdose

- Slow or no breathing, they may look like they are sleeping
- Gurgling, gasping, or snoring
- Pale, gray, or blue fingernails or lips
- Ashen, white lips on a person of color
- Cool, clammy skin
- Unresponsive to external stimuli

If the person shows signs and symptoms of an opioid overdose, give naloxone even if you don't know what substance the person took.

Naloxone is a safe medication that can **temporarily** stop the effects of opioids and help a person start breathing again.

Naloxone only works on opioids and will have no effect on someone who has taken a different substance.

In Washington State, anyone can obtain naloxone at retail pharmacies, even if you don't have a prescription from a doctor. You can use the WA State Standing Order to dispense naloxone in lieu of a prescription from a primary care provider.



Watch a training video on overdose reversal

<https://vimeo.com/357020563> or stopoverdose.org/section/take-the-online-training/



Share this resource with a friend or family member

Take a picture with your cell phone, keep a quick sheet with the naloxone, and learn more at stopoverdose.org or bit.ly/naloxoneinstructions.

If you take anything not prescribed to you or obtained from a pharmacy or purchased at a cannabis dispensary:

Assume that what you’re taking likely has fentanyl in it, which may significantly increase opioid overdose risks.

This is not a substitute for more complete overdose response training from a medical provider or health educator. Some content in this publication is adapted from WA Department of Health and ADAI. Naloxone nasal spray instructions are adapted from Adapt Pharma/Emergent BioSolutions.

