

Opioid use and misuse are growing

Here's what to know and how to help.



Some alarming statistics on drug abuse

The illegal drug markets for cocaine and synthetic opioids are expanding globally. And dealers are using social media platforms to target potential buyers, including youth. At the same time, substance use disorders and overdoses — both fatal and nonfatal — are on the rise.

- An estimated 1 in 17 people aged 15–64 used a drug in the past 12 months.
- The number of users increased 23% (240 million to 296 million) from 2011 to 2021 — a rate that outpaces population growth.
- About 20% of them (60 million) used opioids.
- Most drug-related deaths (nearly 80%) are related to opioids, which also have the highest overdose rates.



How opioids work

Opioids work by attaching to special parts of nerve cells in the brain and body, called mu-opioid receptors. When they do this, they can reduce pain and stop coughing if used correctly. But opioids can also create a strong feeling of pleasure or euphoria, which can make people want to use them repeatedly. This can lead to dependence and addiction, whether the opioid is heroin or a prescription medication.

Many overdose deaths occur when users unknowingly buy and use fentanyl, thinking they are purchasing heroin or prescription pills. Fentanyl is often mixed with heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine and other street drugs. It is up to 100 times more potent than heroin or prescription opioids.

Since opioids are becoming more available globally — both through prescriptions and illegal sources — global experts expect misuse, substance use disorders and overdoses will continue to increase.



Prevention and treatment

To help reverse this distressing trend, health care, policymaking and justice organizations around the world are working to raise awareness of the risks associated with opioid use and misuse. They're also putting strategies in place to combat it — and working to make clinically proven medications to treat opioid use disorders and prevent deadly overdoses more widely available.

Substance use disorders — including opioid addiction — are treatable. Approaches include a combination of abstinence, cognitive behavioral therapy (talk therapy) and self-help support, as well as medications for opioid use disorder. With access to the right level of care and support, people can achieve stabilization, build resiliency and sustain recovery.

In addition, the medication Naloxone can reverse the life-threatening effects of an opioid overdose. It's considered easy to administer and is approved in many parts of the world for prescription and/or over-the-counter use.

Knowing the signs of an overdose

- Heavy nodding
- No response when you yell the person's name or rub the middle of the chest hard
- Blue lips or blue fingertips
- Slow breathing (less than one breath every five seconds) or no breathing
- Very limp body and very pale face
- Choking sounds or a gurgling, snoring noise

How to use naloxone in an emergency

In the event of an overdose, remain calm and follow these steps to quickly use naloxone in nasal spray form:

1. Lay the person on their back to receive a dose of Narcan nasal spray.
2. Remove Narcan nasal spray from the box. Peel back the tab with the circle to open the Narcan nasal spray.
3. Hold the Narcan nasal spray with your thumb on the bottom of the red plunger and your first and middle fingers on either side of the nozzle.
4. Tilt the person's head back and provide support under the neck with your hand. Gently insert the tip of the nozzle into one nostril until your fingers on either side of the nozzle are against the bottom of the person's nose.
5. Press the red plunger firmly to give the dose of Narcan nasal spray.
6. Remove the Narcan nasal spray from the nostril after giving the dose.

Important: If there's no reaction in three minutes, give a second dose. Once naloxone is administered, dial 911 immediately, as the drug will wear off in 30 to 90 minutes.

Sources

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Critical support when you need it

Visit optumwellbeing.com/criticalsupportcenter for additional critical support resources and information.



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