



WHAT ARE OPIOIDS AND WHO IS AT RISK OF AN OPIOID OVERDOSE?

Opioids are a class of prescription medication commonly prescribed to treat moderate to severe pain. Taking opioids in excess can cause breathing and heart rate to slow and may eventually cease entirely. The cause of death most frequently cited in opioid overdose is lack of oxygen.

Prescription opioids (e.g., oxycodone (OxyContin), hydrocodone (Vicodin), morphine, fentanyl and methadone) can be prescribed by healthcare providers to treat moderate to severe pain. These medications can have serious side effects and should be taken only under supervision of a healthcare provider.

Heroin is an illegal opioid that is often used along with other drugs or alcohol, which is especially dangerous because it increases the risk of overdose.

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that is many times more powerful than other opioids and prescribed to control severe pain. Illicit fentanyl is typically mixed into other illegal drugs. Fentanyl-laced drugs are extremely dangerous, and many people may be unaware that their drugs are laced with fentanyl. Illegally made and distributed fentanyl has been on the rise across the country.

Other illicit drugs, like cocaine and methamphetamine, can also contain opioids, such as fentanyl.

People who use illicit drugs are not the only people who are at risk for an opioid overdose. Anyone who takes prescription opioids can become addicted to them. Using opioids together with other medications such as benzodiazepines or other drugs that can depress the central nervous system can increase the risk of an opioid overdose.

Substance use disorder is a chronic mental health condition, and relapse is common. People using drugs after a period of abstinence (e.g., after exiting a recovery facility, after a period in jail or prison, or due to drug testing requirements within specialty dockets) are at particularly high risk for relapse and overdose. Taking opioids frequently or over a long period of time causes the person to develop tolerance to opioids, increasing the dose necessary to experience the same pain relief or euphoric effects. After abstaining from drug use, tolerance begins to return to normal. If a person begins using opioids again in the same capacity that they were using before the period of abstinence, they are at heightened risk for fatal overdose as their tolerance may have changed during abstinence.

WHAT IS AN OPIOID REVERSAL AGENT?

An opioid reversal agent is a medication used to reverse the effects of an opioid overdose. Naloxone, an opioid reversal agent that is widely available in Virginia, has been approved by the FDA since 1971. When used appropriately, it can reverse an opioid overdose, allowing a person to resume breathing and potentially saving their life. Naloxone is intended to be administered during a suspected overdose and does not take the place of emergency medical care; individuals who have received naloxone should still be transported to the emergency department.

There are multiple forms of naloxone, including naloxone that is injected into the muscle (intramuscular) and naloxone that is administered in the form of a nasal spray (intranasal). Nasal naloxone includes the brand name Narcan and a generic formulation.

NALOXONE AND THE VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

The Virginia Department of Health (VDH) distributes naloxone at no-cost to high-impact partners across Virginia. High-impact partners are those that have contact with and are able to dispense to people at high risk of experiencing and/or witnessing opioid overdose, namely:

- ✓ People who use drugs.
- ✓ Friends, family, and caregivers of people who use drugs.
- ✓ People who work with people who use drugs.

VDH will also work with public entities who have identified funding available and wish to purchase naloxone directly from VDH. This is offered via an at-cost Memorandum Of Understanding (MOU) which then allows the public entity to purchase naloxone from VDH. **For more information, contact:** opioidreversal@vdh.virginia.gov

Importantly, VDH does not have the resources to provide naloxone to every individual or organization that might be interested in receiving it. VDH intends to provide naloxone to high-risk individuals and/or high-impact organizations that are not able to access naloxone other ways. Individuals and organizations are encouraged to explore multiple modalities of accessing naloxone, including:

- ✓ Purchasing over-the-counter (OTC) Narcan from retail pharmacies.
- ✓ Purchasing prescription naloxone (e.g. using the standing order or with a prescription) and billing it to individual's insurance.

HOW CAN MY SPECIALTY DOCKET ACCESS NALOXONE?

Specialty dockets can develop an MOU with VDH to receive no-cost naloxone directly. Dockets can also work with local partners like local health districts, community service boards or behavioral health authorities, or comprehensive harm reduction sites to provide training to identify overdoses and administer naloxone; these partners may also dispense naloxone to specialty docket participants, pursuant to the Board of Pharmacy Naloxone Protocol, Guidance Document 110-44. Alternatively, OTC Narcan can be purchased from reputable retailers.

WHAT OTHER RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE?

Community partners can provide additional support for specialty docket participants. For example, local health districts can provide connections to testing and treatment for health concerns that are linked to drug use, including HIV and Hepatitis C. Participants may also be able to access treatment for mental health concerns, including substance use disorder, via the local community service boards or behavioral health authorities.