

Preventing Opioid Overdose

What to know

- Overdoses are the leading injury-related cause of death in the United States.
- Opioids, mainly illegally made fentanyl, are involved in the highest percentage of overdose deaths.
- Ways to prevent opioid overdose are to improve opioid prescribing, reduce exposure to opioids, prevent illegal opioid use and prescription opioid misuse, and treat opioid use disorder.

Opioid use disorder and overdoses are preventable

When we act early, we can prevent illegal substance use, including illegal opioids, and misuse of prescription medications, like opioids, that can lead to substance use disorders.

Substance use disorders, like opioid use disorder (OUD), impact communities across America. Prevention activities help educate and support individuals, families, and communities and are critical for maintaining both individual and community health.

Opioid Use Disorder (OUD), sometimes referred to as "opioid dependence" or "opioid addiction," is a problematic pattern of opioid use that causes significant impairment or distress. OUD is a medical condition that can affect anyone – regardless of race, gender, income level, or social class. Like many other medical conditions, evidence-based treatments are available for OUD, but seeking treatment remains stigmatized. Stigma can be a major barrier to how well prevention and treatment programs work amid the opioid crisis.

Keep in mind

Stigma or the fear of stigma may stop someone from sharing their health condition with partners or family members. Stigma may come from a specific person, including a loved one or clinician, or from the larger community. People seeking treatment for OUD may find that some clinicians have stigmatizing attitudes about OUD. Stigmatizing attitudes toward people with OUD among

clinicians can create barriers for those seeking the health services they need.¹ People who experience health-related stigma may also experience less access to treatment or reduced adherence to treatments.² Learn more about what you can do to reduce stigma.

OID significantly contributes to overdose deaths among people who use illegal opioids or misuse prescription opioids. Opioids—mainly synthetic opioids like illegally made fentanyl—are currently the most represented in overdose deaths.

A recent study among 29 states and the District of Columbia showed the percentage of overdose deaths involving counterfeit pills **more than doubled** from July 2019 to December 2021, and **more than tripled** in the Western United States. These pills are dangerous because they typically appear as pharmaceutical pills but often contain illegally made fentanyl and illegal benzodiazepines or other drugs, with or without people's knowledge.

For every overdose that results in death, there are many more nonfatal overdoses, each one with its own emotional and economic toll.³ OUD and overdose deaths continue to be a major public health concern in the United States, but they are preventable.

People can help reduce the risk of counterfeit pill overdose by:

- Only taking pills prescribed to them
- Being aware that pills bought illegally might contain highly potent drugs
- Using fentanyl test strips (FTS), small strips of paper that can detect the presence of fentanyl in all different kinds of drugs (cocaine, methamphetamine, heroin, etc.) and drug forms (pills, powder, and injectables)

Get the facts

- **Overdoses are the leading injury-related cause of death** in the United States and appear to have accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴
- In 2022, **107,941** people died from drug overdoses, which equates to **296 overdoses each day**.
- Among the 2022 overdose deaths, nearly **76% involved an opioid**.

- Research shows that people who have had at least one overdose are more likely to have another.
- In 2022, an **estimated 54.6 million Americans** needed substance use disorder treatment, but **only 13.1 million people** with a substance use disorder in the past year received treatment.

International Overdose Awareness Day

On August 31 of each year, International Overdose Awareness Day (IOAD) is recognized globally as a day to remember and grieve those that we've lost, take action to encourage support and recovery, and help end overdose by spreading awareness about drug overdose prevention. Join us as an IOAD partner by using your voice and platforms to spread messages about ending overdose

Promising prevention strategies

Ways to prevent opioid overdose are to improve opioid prescribing, reduce exposure to opioids, prevent illegal opioid use and prescription opioid misuse, and treat opioid use disorder. There are strategies that can help prevent overdose and support the health and well-being of communities.

- **Promote and support the use of the** CDC Clinical Practice Guideline for Prescribing Opioids for Pain.
- **Utilize** prescription drug monitoring programs, which are state-run databases that track prescriptions for controlled substances and can help improve opioid prescribing, inform clinical practice, and protect those at risk.
- **Learn** about the risks of prescription opioids and about the help and resources that are available for someone who may be experiencing opioid use disorder. See CDC's *Rx Awareness* Campaign for shareable resources and information on improving awareness.
- **Learn** more about the dangers of illegally made fentanyl and ways to protect yourself and others, like using fentanyl test strips.

- **Treat opioid use disorder** by increasing access to substance use disorder treatment services, including Medications for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD). Recovery is possible.
- **Reverse overdose** by expanding access to naloxone, a drug used to reverse an opioid overdose, for community members (family members and neighbors) and service providers (i.e., first responders).
- **Help communities put effective practices to work by using evidence-based strategies**

How to recognize an overdose

Recognizing an opioid overdose can be difficult. If you aren't sure, it is best to treat the situation like an overdose—you could save a life. Administer naloxone or another opioid overdose reversal medication (if available) and then call 911. Try to keep the person awake and breathing and lay the person on their side to prevent choking. Do not leave the person alone.

Signs of an overdose may include:

- Unconsciousness or inability to awaken
- Slow or shallow breathing or difficulty breathing such as choking sounds or gurgling/snoring noise from a person who cannot be awakened
- Discolored skin (especially in nails or lips)
- Small, constricted "pinpoint pupils" that don't react to light

Find treatment for substance use disorder, including opioid use disorder

If you or someone close to you needs help for a substance use disorder, talk to your doctor or call SAMHSA's National Helpline at 1-800-662-HELP or go to SAMHSA's Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator