

Understanding the Opioid Overdose Epidemic

What to know

- The number of opioid-involved deaths has increased substantially since 1999.
- There have been three distinct waves of increases in opioid overdose deaths over the last 25 years, with each wave driven by different types of opioids.
- Increasing communities' overdose prevention and response support, capacity, and education may help save lives.

Opioid overdose deaths remain high

Opioid-involved overdose deaths

- Nearly 108,000 people died from drug overdose in 2022 and approximately 82,000 of those deaths involved opioids (about 76%).
- The number of people who died from an opioid overdose in 2022 was 10 times the number in 1999; however, opioid overdose death rates were relatively stable from 2021 to 2022.
- Death rates involving various types of opioids are changing differently.

From 2021-2022:

- The rate of overdose deaths involving synthetic opioids other than methadone (primarily illegally made fentanyl and fentanyl analogs) **increased** approximately 4%.
- The rate of overdose deaths involving heroin **decreased** 36%.
- The rate of overdose deaths involving prescription opioids **decreased** approximately 12%

- From 1999-2022, nearly 727,000 people died from an opioid overdose. This includes overdose deaths involving prescription and illegal opioids.
- This rise in opioid overdose deaths can be outlined in three distinct waves.
- ***First wave***
- The first wave began with increased prescribing of opioids in the 1990s. Overdose deaths involving prescription opioids (natural and semi-synthetic opioids and methadone) increased starting around 1999³ but have declined in recent years.¹
- ***Second wave***
- The second wave began in 2010, with rapid increases in overdose deaths involving heroin. However, in recent years, heroin overdose deaths have been declining.
- ***Third wave***
- The third wave began in 2013, with substantial increases in overdose deaths involving synthetic opioids, particularly those involving illegally made fentanyl and fentanyl analogs (IMFs). IMFs have saturated the illegal drug supply. They are often found in powder form or pressed into counterfeit pills and can be mixed into other drugs. More recently, non-opioid sedatives, such as xylazine, have been found mixed into IMFs.
- In the current landscape, many opioid overdose deaths also involved other drugs. In 2022, among a sub-set of jurisdictions, nearly 43% of drug overdose deaths involved both opioids and stimulants.
- **Confronting the opioid overdose epidemic**
- CDC is committed to addressing the opioid overdose epidemic and supporting states and communities as they continue work to identify outbreaks, collect data, respond to overdoses, and provide care to those in their communities.

What CDC's work focuses on

- **Monitoring trends** to better understand and respond to the epidemic.
- **Advancing research** by collecting and analyzing data on opioid overdoses and improving data quality to better identify areas that need assistance and to evaluate prevention efforts.

- **Building state, local and tribal capacity** by equipping states with resources, improving data collection, and supporting use of evidence-based strategies. Overdose Data to Action (OD2A) is a cooperative agreement provides funding to 90 health departments under two distinct OD2A programs to reduce drug overdoses and related harms.
- Supporting providers, healthcare systems, and payers with data, tools, and guidance for evidence-based decision-making to improve opioid prescribing and patient safety.
- Partnering with public safety officials and community organizations, including law enforcement, to address the growing illegal opioid problem.
- Increasing public awareness about prescription opioid misuse and overdose and to make safer choices about opioids.