

WHAT IS AN OPIOID?

Opioids are a group of medications that are commonly prescribed to treat pain. In combination with pain relief, opioids can also produce a high which keeps users relaxed, while elevating their overall levels of contentment; a combination which may give people using them an increased potential for improper use.

Opioids can be prescribed legally by medical professionals, but they are also sold illicitly on the black market.

TYPES OF MEDICATIONS AND ADMINISTRATION

There are many different types of opioids that are commonly used today, both legally and illegally:

- Heroin
- Codeine
- Fentanyl
- Morphine
- Oxycodone

OPIOIDS CAN BE TAKEN IN SEVERAL WAYS, INCLUDING:

- Injected
- Liquid, or spray form
- Syrups
- Tablets
- Capsules
- Skin adhesive patches

WHAT ARE THE SIDE EFFECTS OF OPIOIDS?

There are many side effects, both long and short term, that users may receive after using opioids. These side effects can be a result of the usage of prescription or illicit opioids. Below are some examples of potential side effects of opioids (not a complete list):

SHORT TERM EFFECTS

- Drowsiness
- Constipation
- Impotence in men
- Nausea and vomiting
- Euphoria (feeling high)
- Difficulty breathing, which can lead to or worsen sleep apnea
- Headaches, dizziness and confusion, which can cause falls and fractures

LONG TERM EFFECTS

- Increased tolerance
- Substance use disorder or physical dependence
- Liver damage
- Infertility in women
- Worsening pain (known as "opioid-induced hyperalgesia")
- Withdrawal symptoms
- Overdose

Note: even when prescribed to treat a specific condition or pain, there are serious side effects and risks to using opioids.

PROBLEMATIC OPIOID USE/MISUSE

Opioids, whether prescribed legally or obtained illicitly, can be misused because they can produce euphoria (feeling high). Heroin and fentanyl are two of the opioids commonly associated with improper use, but usage of any opioids can result in problematic use, even prescription opioids. Indeed, even prescription opioids can result in addictions or usage abuses if not used appropriately as directed by the prescriber.

COMMON WAYS OF MISUSE:

- Taking an opioid that was not prescribed to you
- Taking more than was prescribed for you
- Taking at the wrong time

Note: this is not an exhaustive list.

WHAT IS AN OPIOID OVERDOSE?

An opioid overdose is when a toxic or lethal amount of opioids have been consumed, which varies from person to person and can be as little as a few grains of salt. A person can overdose on illicit opioids or prescription opioids.

SYMPTOMS MAY INCLUDE:

- Slow or no breathing
- Unresponsiveness
- Changes in skin colour
- Deep snoring or gurgling

Opioid overdoses can be countered with opioid antagonists (antagonists are substances that stop the physiological effects of another substance).

WHAT IS NALOXONE?

Naloxone is an opioid antagonist (which means it's a substance that stops the physiological effects of something) that is indicated for emergency use to reverse a known or suspected opioid overdose, as manifested by respiratory and/or severe central nervous system depression.

Opioid antagonists, such as naloxone, work by binding to the same receptors in the brain that opioids attach to, effectively preventing the opioid from attaching and working on the receptor, which results in reversing the symptoms and effects from the overdose. It is recommended that even after medications like naloxone have been administered, that those suffering from a suspected overdose seek immediate medical attention, as opioids can live in the body longer than naloxone.