

Opioids and Narcan

What you need to know



What Are Opioids?

Opioids are a class of drugs used to reduce pain. The term 'opioids' refers to the entire family of these drugs. Opioids can be illegal (e.g., heroin), by prescription for pain management (e.g., Oxycontin, Percocet) or by prescription for addiction treatment (e.g., methadone, Suboxone).

What do opioids do?

Opioids attach to proteins in the body called opioid receptors, and may have the following effects:

- Euphoria (feeling high)
- Feeling warm, drowsy, and happy
- Decreased stress and discomfort
- Constipation
- Slow heart rate and breathing

What are the risk factors for an overdose?

An overdose is more likely to occur in someone who:

- Has a reduced tolerance after a period of abstinence. For example, after treatment.
- Doesn't know the strength of the drug.
- Is using alone.
- Is using without an observer who has Narcan.
- Is mixing opioids with other drugs/alcohol.
- Has physical health problems.

What is Narcan?

Narcan is a drug that reverses an opioid overdose by knocking opioids off the opioid receptors and keeping opioids from binding to the receptors.

Narcan will only reverse the effects of opioids.

It will not counter the effects of other drugs such as benzodiazepines and alcohol. However, if someone used opioids in combination with other drugs, you should still administer Narcan because the Narcan will reverse the effects of the opioids.

Facts to remember about Narcan:

- It will not cause harm if given to a person who is not experiencing an opioid overdose.
- Narcan has no other effects; it can't be used to get high and is not addictive.
- It wears off after 30-90 minutes after which time the person could overdose again, even if they take no additional opioids.
- Narcan can bring on withdrawal symptoms in a person who is opioid dependent.
- It should be stored at room temperature and kept away from light.

Knowing and understanding the risks of opioid use can help you make informed decisions, foster self-worth, and encourage self-advocacy.



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What is Harm Reduction?

Harm reduction is a set of strategies that reduce negative consequences associated with drug use. It uses a wide range of techniques (e.g., teaching safer use, needle exchange programs, supervised injection sites) to meet drug users “where they’re at.” Harm reduction recognizes that drug use is a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon, and works to minimize its harmful effects, rather than ignore or condemn.

Harm Reduction Strategies

Safer drug use practices that reduce the risk of an overdose:

- Know your tolerance and use less after any period of abstinence or decreased use (e.g., treatment). Even a few days away can lower your tolerance.
- Test the strength of the drug before you use the whole amount.
- Use less when you are sick and your immune system may be weakened.
- Try not to use alone. If you do use alone, call or text someone you trust and have them check on you.
- Take turns using – have one person with Narcan observe and wait at least 10 minutes to use.
- Be careful when changing modes of administration since you may not be able to handle the same amount.
- Don’t mix opioids with other drugs/alcohol.

Opioid Use and Infectious Disease

Use of opioids, especially when injected, increases the risk for contracting an infectious disease such as HIV (human immunodeficiency virus), hepatitis (inflammation of the liver), and infective endocarditis (inflammation of the inner lining of the heart). Here are some strategies to reduce the risk of disease:

- Get vaccinated against hepatitis A and hepatitis B.
- Get tested regularly for HIV, hepatitis, and STDs.
- Use sterile (new) needles and equipment. You can find needle exchange programs in MA at <https://www.mass.gov/syringe-service> programs.
- Use sterile water to prepare drugs.
- Clean skin with a new alcohol swab before injecting.
- Be careful not to get someone else’s blood on hands, needles, or equipment. Dispose of used needles safely in a puncture-proof container.
- Ask your health care provider about taking medicine to prevent HIV (called pre-exposure prophylaxis or PrEP).



Good Samaritan Law

The Massachusetts Good Samaritan Law (Chapter 94C, Section 34A) protects individuals who experience an overdose and those who call 911 from charge, prosecution, and conviction for the possession or use of controlled substances.

What the law does:

- Protects people from prosecution for possession of controlled substances when calling 911.
- Provides legal protection for people who possess and/or administer Narcan to someone appearing to have an opioid overdose.

The law does not:

- Interfere with law enforcement securing the scene at an overdose.
- Prevent prosecution for drug trafficking.
- Prevent prosecution for outstanding warrants.