

Western Pennsylvania Guide to Good Health

Health News You and Your Family Can Use

Recognizing and Responding to Opioid Overdose: Gateway Experts Help You Prepare

By Nancy Kennedy

If you encounter or witness a loved one, friend, co-worker or even a stranger having a substance use emergency such as opioid overdose, will you recognize what is happening? Will you know what to do? Do you have the essential knowledge, skills, and tools to save that person's life? Do you have naloxone, otherwise known as Narcan, the opioid overdose reversal medicine, and do you know how to use it?

The expert professionals at Gateway Rehabilitation Center encourage everyone to learn how to prevent, recognize and manage a substance use disorder emergency, including opioid overdose. “Be prepared. Everyone should know how to help a person who has overdosed,” says Julia D’Alo, MD, a board-certified Addiction Medicine and Emergency Medicine specialist and Chief Medical Officer at Gateway. Substance use disorders (SUD) occur when the recurrent use of alcohol and/or drugs causes clinically significant impairment, including health problems, disability, and failure to meet major responsibilities at work, school, or home.

SUD is so widespread across all levels of the US population that it is the leading cause of death and affects nearly every American family in some way. Over 500,000 Americans have died of opioid overdose since the opioid epidemic began during the 90’s, and it continues to be a major public health crisis.

“If you know a person who is struggling with opioids, or is taking a prescription opioid for pain management, or if you are a user and use with others – you may need to intervene one day to keep someone alive,” Dr. D’Alo says. “You never know who may need help; you can come across an unresponsive person anywhere, at home, at work or in public.

“Opioids include heroin and prescription medications such as Fentanyl, Vicodin, OxyContin, Percocet, Morphine, Dilaudid and Tramadol to name a few. If you are using an opioid or have a loved one who is, you need to obtain Narcan and know the signs of overdose. Narcan is easy to get, easy to use and it works quickly. It’s a nasal spray that reverses the effect of opioids within minutes.”

Laura Bisbey, CAADC, LPC, Regional Director of Inpatient Services at Gateway, describes both early and later signs of overdose: “Early symptoms of overdose include falling asleep, coming in and out of consciousness, and becoming limp. The breathing may be slow and shallow, and eventually absent. There may be gurgling noises or choking. The pupils may be pinpoint. The skin and nails develop a bluish discoloration. The person does



Julia D’Alo, MD and Laura Bisbey

not respond to their name or to pain.”

Bisbey says that if Narcan is available, give it immediately and call 911. “It’s easy to give – put it in the nostril and push the button. Wait two to three minutes and if there’s no response, give it again. Sometimes a person needs multiple doses until they respond. If it does not work, it’s not an opioid overdose. However, there is no risk to giving Narcan if it is not an opioid overdose. If you do not have naloxone and the person does not have a pulse, start CPR, if you are qualified, until the EMS arrives.”

D’Alo says that persons with SUD are frequent visitors to the Emergency Department. “We see many patients with SUD. It may be that they are experiencing a medical problem that the SUD is the cause of or contributing to. While opioid overdose is the most common SUD emergency, there are additional critical substance-related situations that require immediate emergency care. These include complications of withdrawal or detoxification, suicide threat or attempt, alcohol poisoning or medical problems due to substance use, such as infections and injuries.”

Narcan is not a substitute for the ER, says Laura Bisbey. “You still have to receive medical care. After Narcan, your system has been cleared of the opioid; you go into immediate withdrawal and will need to be connected to recovery resources. Gateway provides a Certified Recovery Specialist, available 24/7, in St. Clair Health’s ER to discuss options with the person. They are peers who have lived experience in recovery themselves.”

Beyond the immediate medical treatment, the ER is a window of opportunity, uniquely positioned to help a person with SUD, adds Dr. D’Alo. “There is a period of vulnerability following overdose, and you will be treated with care, dignity and respect. Recovery is always possible and emergency care can be a very effective pathway to recovery.”



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