

Opioid Factsheet

What is an Opioid?

Opioids belong to a class of drugs naturally found in the opium poppy plant. Some prescription opioids are made from the plant, and others by scientists in labs, known as synthetic opioids. Prescription opioids are intended for pain relief. Opioids can cause people to feel very relaxed and "high," a euphoric type feeling, which is why they are sometimes used for non-medical purposes. This can be dangerous, as opioids are highly addictive, and can lead to both non-fatal and fatal overdoses. Common prescription opioids include but are not limited to oxycodone (OxyContin, Percocet), hydrocodone (Vicodin), morphine, and methadone. Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid and is much more powerful than other opioids, 50 – 100 times stronger than morphine. Fentanyl is intended for use with severe pain, such as cancer pain. Fentanyl is also manufactured illegally, and has been found to lace other illicit drugs, such as heroin, cocaine, methamphetamines, and what are thought to be prescription painkillers purchased off the street. Fentanyl is now the most common drug responsible for drug-related overdose deaths in the United States. Heroin is an opioid drug made from morphine and is used illegally. Heroin can be a white or brown powder, or a black sticky substance known as black tar heroin.



How Do Opioids Work?

Opioids bind to and activate receptors on cells located in many areas of the brain, especially those involved in feelings of pain and pleasure. When opioids attach to these receptors, they block pain signals sent from the brain to the body and release large amounts of dopamine throughout the body. Dopamine is referred to as the "feel good" neurotransmitter, as it contributes to feelings of pleasure. This release can strongly reinforce the act of taking the drug, making the user want to repeat the experience. It varies by individual, but one can become addicted to opioids in as little as a few days to a couple of weeks.

Prescription Opioids – Safety Protocol

- Never take more than the prescribed dose.
- If you miss a dose, do not take a double dose to catch up.
- Do not combine opioids with alcohol.
- Do not combine opioids with other medications or drugs unless your doctor has said it is OK.
- Stop taking opioid medications as soon as your doctor agrees they are no longer needed.
- Always follow the prescribed directions.
- When taking liquid doses, use an accurate measuring device and measure out only the prescribed amount.
- Use the medication only in the form in which it was prescribed.
- Never use another person's prescription or share your prescription with others.

Signs and Symptoms of Opioid Overdose

- Unresponsiveness/Unconsciousness
- Limp posture
- Pale or clammy skin
- Blue fingernails and lips
- For lighter skinned people, the skin tone turns bluish purple; for darker skinned people, the skin tone turns grayish or ashen
- Slow, shallow, erratic breathing or not breathing
- Slow, erratic pulse or no pulse
- Choking sounds or a snore-like gurgling noise

Opioid Overdose: What to Do

- Call 911 immediately, report a drug overdose, and give the street address and location of the victim. If there are others available, send someone to wait in the street for the ambulance and guide the emergency medical technicians to the victim.
- Try to rouse the victim by speaking loudly, pinching, or rubbing your knuckles vigorously up and down the sternum (the bony part in the middle of the chest.)
- Make sure the victim is breathing. If not, administer rescue breathing (mouth-to-mouth) by pinching the victim's nose shut and blowing into the mouth. Lay the victim on their side after they have resumed breathing on their own.
- Administer an opioid antagonist, such as naloxone, if you have it and know how to use it. Naloxone can be obtained from any pharmacy without a prescription per DPH Commissioner Kathleen Toomey (Naloxone Standing Order).
- Stay with the victim until help arrives. Encourage the victim to cooperate with the ambulance crew.

Georgia's 911 Medical Amnesty Law

- Although most overdoses occur in the presence of others, fear of arrest and prosecution prevent many people from calling 911.
- Georgia's Medical Amnesty Law protects victims and callers seeking medical assistance at drug or alcohol overdose scenes.
- Limited liability for possession of small amounts of drugs and/or alcohol—This applies to the victim as well as the caller.
- Limited liability for breaches of parole, restraining order, probation, and other violations.
- Naloxone immunity for prescribers, pharmacists, and first responders.



Jen Wingertsahn
Opioid Prevention Specialist
South Health District (8-1)
229-300-0454
jennifer.wingertsahn@dph.ga.gov

For more info, visit
<https://dph.georgia.gov/stopopioidaddiction>