

OPIOID FACTS

Facts about Opiates and Opioid Abuse

Identification:

Opiates are natural, semi-synthetic or synthetic drugs that produce pain-killing effects. The most commonly used opioids are heroin and prescription opioids such as hydrocodone (e.g., Vicodin®), oxycodone (e.g., OxyContin®), morphine, codeine, and fentanyl.

The most dangerous opioid is carfentanil, followed by the more widely known fentanyl. Fentanyl, a synthetic opioid, is the leading cause of drug overdose deaths, followed by heroin. Fentanyl is 50 times more potent than heroin, and 100 times more potent than morphine. It is generally only prescribed for severe pain. Carfentanil is not intended for human use, although drug dealers sometimes mix either of these two opioids into their drug supplies (for both heroin and cocaine) to provide their users with a more potent and addictive high.

Opiates can be derived from the opium poppy or can be synthesized in a laboratory. Some street names for opioids include oxy, percs, norco, dope, and smack.

- **Opioid use** - generally refers to the medical use as intended to relieve pain.
- **Opioid misuse** or *non-medical use* - more frequent use than recommended or prescribed (time between doses or multiple doses at the same time), done to produce a desired or recreational effect.
- **Opioid abuse** - refers to those individuals who are classified as having opioid use disorder, which encompasses multiple criteria used to diagnose a patient with the substance use disorder.

Methods of Use:

Opioids can be taken orally, sniffed, smoked, or injected. Oftentimes, those who start taking prescription opioids orally may transition to other routes of administration to get a quicker and/or more potent effect, such as crushing up the pills and snorting them, smoking, or eventually initiating heroin use.

Extent of Use:

Pain killers are the 4th most misused drugs among adolescents, behind tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana. In 2016, it was estimated that approximately 891,000 of those aged 12-17 years misused opioids in the last year, and approximately 389,000 were current users (last 30 days).

Prescription drug misuse rates among adolescents were estimated to be as high as 10.5%, however adolescent use has dropped in more recent years and as of 2020 was between 1% and 4%, nationally.

Sexual minority adolescents have higher rates of opioid misuse than heterosexuals.

Drug diversion (the transfer of a legally prescribed substance from the patient to another person for illicit use) is a particular problem for preventing opioid misuse in adolescents, as it has become increasingly easier for them to obtain drugs from their family or friends. In some cases, it may even be easier to obtain prescription pain killers than other drugs such as alcohol and marijuana because prescription pain killers can be so readily available in the household.

Effects of Use:

Besides an analgesic (pain-killing) effect, other effects usually include euphoria, slurred speech, slowed respiration, drowsiness and itching. Common side effects of prescription opioids include sedation, dizziness, nausea, vomiting, constipation, respiratory depression, and physical dependence (tolerance and withdrawal symptoms). Withdrawal symptoms may include craving, tearing up, anxiety, depression, sleep problems and excessive yawning, nose running, sweats, racing heart, hypertension, fever, difficulty concentrating, irritability, agitation, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, goosebumps, muscle cramping, or abdominal pain, some of which that can last for around a week.

Opioids can produce a euphoric response, and combined with the strong addictive properties of the drug, the potential for misuse is high. Many who misuse, or abuse opioids endorse “relieving pain” as the main motive for misuse, which could include emotional pain as well as physical pain.

Heroin injection typically provides a ‘rush’ unlike any other drug. The immediate and euphoric feeling of the drug has been described by users as unexplainable and uncontrollable. Heroin users may have used opioids before through various other methods of administration. However, when compared to heroin, other opioids tend to involve slower immediate effects and a less potent high.

Opioids can impair cognitive and psychomotor functioning, especially for persons taking the drug for the first time. Persons under the influence of opioids may not realize the extent of their impairment and attempt to operate machinery or drive cars, potentially becoming a danger to themselves and others.

Overdose Information:

Naloxone, also known as Narcan, is a safe and effective antidote to opioid overdoses. Naloxone can be bought over-the-counter in California, and may be helpful if one ever encounters a situation as a bystander, family, or friend who is witnessing an opioid overdose. One can obtain Naloxone at the local pharmacy without a prescription, and pharmacists will also offer a brief in-store training on its use.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has a National Helpline: **1-800-662-HELP (4357)**, which offers free, confidential, 24/7, 365-day-a-year treatment referral and information services (in English and Spanish) for individuals and families facing mental and/or substance use disorders.

OPIOID ABUSE CONSEQUENCES

1. Opioid abuse can cause significant impairment, such as health problems, disability and failure to meet major responsibilities at work, school or home.
2. Impairments in verbal working memory, impulsivity and cognitive flexibility (verbal fluency) are some of the neuropsychological consequences of prolonged use.
3. Opioid use can cause impairments in cognitive and psychomotor functioning, making driving cars and operating heavy machinery dangerous.
4. Facilitated by its use, heroin users may experience mental disorders and sexual dysfunction, and women's menstrual cycles may tend to become irregular.
5. Those who snort heroin can damage their mucosal tissues and/or perforate their septum (hole in the cartilage of the nose).
6. Intravenous (IV) injection users put themselves at risk for HIV, scarred and collapsed veins, bacterial infections of the blood vessels and heart valves, and abscesses.
7. Respiratory depression, or slowed breathing, can occur due to the sedative effects of the drug and may result in overdose and death.