

# Health tip: Understanding opioid addiction and drug misuse

Opioid addiction and drug misuse are pressing public health issues that impact individuals, families, and communities. Understanding the risks, signs, and solutions is vital to addressing this crisis.

## Key facts about the opioid crisis

- In 2023, 81.4% of deaths from overdose involved at least one opioid.<sup>1</sup>
- 71.6% of people who died of a drug overdose were male, 25.9% were 35–44 years old, and 61.3% were White, non-Hispanic.<sup>1</sup>
- On average, 224 people died each day from an opioid overdose in 2022.<sup>2</sup>

## What are opioids?<sup>3</sup>

Opioids are a class of drugs that act on the brain to relieve pain. They fall into three main categories:

- **Prescription opioids** – These are prescribed by doctors to treat moderate to severe pain and include medications like acetaminophen, OxyContin, and Vicodin.
- **Natural opioids** – These may be prescribed by doctors and include codeine and morphine.
- **Synthetic opioids** – These are considered psychoactive substances and include drugs such as fentanyl and oxycodone.
- **Illegal drugs** – Also known as “street drugs”, these cannot be obtained from a doctor or drug store and include heroin and methamphetamine. These are highly addictive.<sup>3</sup>

## Recognizing the signs of misuse<sup>4</sup>

### Behavioral symptoms:

- Withdrawal from family and friends
- Loss of interest in hobbies
- Hostility toward those attempting to intervene

### Physical symptoms:

- Dilated pupils
- Decline in personal hygiene
- Frequent headaches and dizziness

### Mental/cognitive symptoms:

- Memory problems
- Depression or paranoia
- Disrupted sleep patterns

## Safe use and prevention<sup>5</sup>

### Before using opioids:

- Share your medical and family history with your doctor.
- Use the lowest effective dose for the shortest duration possible.
- Set clear treatment goals with your healthcare provider.<sup>3</sup>

### Prevention strategies:<sup>6</sup>

- Develop healthy coping mechanisms like exercise, mindfulness, and creative outlets.
- Build supportive networks and engage in community activities.
- Avoid using opioids as a primary solution for chronic pain.<sup>6</sup>

### Treatment and recovery<sup>7</sup>

Addiction is treatable, and recovery is possible. Effective treatment often combines medications and behavioral therapy.

- **Support roles** – Loved ones may help by reducing stigma, carrying naloxone, and providing encouragement.
- **What not to say** – Avoid judgmental or dismissive statements that may discourage recovery efforts.<sup>7</sup>



## Resources for help

### Local resources

Hospitals, police departments, and human services organizations can provide immediate assistance.

### National resources

- SAMHSA National Helpline:  
**1-800-662-HELP (4357)**
- Drugfree.org
- HRSA.gov

#### Sources:

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