



Opioid Overdose Crisis Continues

The misuse of and addiction to opioids—including prescription pain relievers, heroin, and synthetic opioids such as fentanyl—is a serious national crisis that continues to worsen.

Why do people choose to misuse their prescription opioid medication? The most commonly identified reason for misuse of a pain reliever drug is to relieve physical pain. But even if the reason for misuse is to relieve pain—and that was the purpose for which the prescription was prescribed—it is still misuse or abuse to use a prescription drug without a prescription of one's own or to use it at a higher dosage or more often than prescribed.

Taking too many prescription opioids, or more than the prescribed dosage, can stop a person's breathing leading to death. On average, there are about 1,000 opioid-related deaths in Georgia every year. From 2010 to 2017, the total number of opioid-related deaths in Georgia increased by 245 percent.

The stressors of 2020 resulted in an increase in drug overdoses nationwide. Almost 20,000 people died of a drug overdose in the first three months of 2020, nearly 3,000 more than in the same timeframe in 2019. More than 81,000 drug overdose deaths occurred in the United States in the 12 months ending May 2020, the highest number ever documented in a one-year period. Opioids were the number one drug of abuse in these deaths.

Some commonly prescribed opioids are:

- Oxycodone
- Fentanyl
- Buprenorphine
- Methadone
- Oxymorphone
- Hydrocodone
- Codeine
- Morphine
- Tapentadol
- Hydromorphone

In addition to the serious risks of addiction, abuse, and overdose, the use of prescription opioids can have a number of side effects, even when taken as directed:

- Tolerance—meaning you might need to take more of the medication for the same pain relief.
- Physical dependence—meaning you have symptoms of withdrawal when the medication is stopped.
- Increased sensitivity to pain.
- Constipation.
- Nausea, vomiting, and dry mouth.
- Sleepiness and dizziness.
- Confusion.
- Depression.
- Low levels of testosterone that can result in lower sex drive, energy, and strength.
- Itching and sweating.

Research has shown that there is a common misperception in the United States that prescription drug misuse is without risk because prescription drugs are regulated pharmaceuticals with legal, medical uses. But the misuse of many of these prescription drugs, such as prescription opioids, even for the purpose they have been prescribed, has documented risks, such as dependence, overdose, and death.

Along with prescribed opioids, synthetic opioids like illicitly produced fentanyl have caused a rapid rise in overdose deaths.

The second most reported reason for the use of opioid-based drugs is to feel good or get high. Many opioids produce a sense of euphoria and often result in addiction. Opioid drugs also pose the danger of permanent organ damage.

Risky Circumstances

According to the CDC, in most overdose deaths at least one of the following circumstances were identified to be present:

- **Recent release from an institution:** Among the people who died from overdoses involving opioids, about 10% had recently been released from an institution (such as jails/prisons, inpatient rehabilitation facilities, psychiatric hospitals).
- **Previous overdose:** Among the people who died from overdoses involving opioids, about 10% had had a previous overdose.
- **Mental health diagnosis:** Among all the people who died of a drug overdose, one quarter had a documented mental health diagnosis (percentage varied by type of drug overdose).

- **Substance use disorder treatment:** Among the people who died from overdoses involving opioids, nearly 20% had previously been treated for substance use disorder.
- **Bystander present:** Nearly 40% of opioid and stimulant overdose deaths occurred while a bystander was present.

Anyone who is taking opioids, or friends and family members of someone taking opioids, should keep Naloxone on hand. Naloxone is a medicine that can quickly reverse an opioid overdose. It works by bringing back normal respiration to a person whose breathing has slowed or stopped as a result of an opioid overdose. Naloxone can be bought at most local drug stores.

Preventing Overdose Deaths

The following are some other ways that you can help to prevent opioid overdose.

- Keep all medications locked away.
- Do not share unused pills with anyone.
- Keep track of how many pills you have left.
- Take unused pills to a drug drop box.
- Talk with your doctor about ways to manage your pain that do not involve prescription opioids.

Recognizing an opioid overdose can be difficult. If you are not sure, it's best to treat the situation like an overdose—you could save a life. Call 911 or seek medical care for the individual. Do not leave the person alone.

Signs of an overdose may include:

- Small, constricted "pinpoint pupils"
- Falling asleep or loss of consciousness
- Slow, shallow breathing
- Choking or gurgling sounds
- Limp body
- Pale, blue, or cold skin

An estimated 2.1 million people in the U.S. currently struggle with an opioid use addiction. The good news is treatment exists for opioid use disorder (OUD). People with OUD have similar success rates as people with other types of chronic health conditions like diabetes, asthma, or heart

disease. For assistance, contact the National Treatment Referral Helpline at 800-662-HELP (4357).

Evidence-based substance abuse prevention programs can stop or delay the onset of drug and alcohol abuse.

Drug free workplace programs reduce substance use-related health, social, and economic costs.

The health and strength of family social structures can be powerful protective factors against drug and alcohol addiction.

Depression is the number one risk factor for suicide. Substance abuse is the number two risk factor for suicide.

Underage drinking can be reduced by consistently enforcing the Minimum Legal Drinking Age through compliance checks at alcohol retailers.

Schools, like companies, can help prevent drug use by instituting evidence-informed prevention education programs.

Prescription Drug Monitoring Programs (PDMPs) help to prevent prescription drug misuse and related harms.

Carefully thought-out prevention measures have reduced the early onset of alcohol, nicotine, and other drug use.

Evidence-informed information about the harmful nature of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs should be given to patients during routine medical examinations.

Everyone must work together to reduce risk factors for unhealthy or harmful substance use, especially by youth.

People at risk of developing an alcohol use disorder can be identified using a Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) approach.

Suicide is a serious public health problem that can have lasting harmful effects on individuals, families, businesses, and communities.