

## Opioid Use: What Parents Need to Know

Drug overdoses are a leading cause of unintentional death in the United States. Many of these overdoses are from prescription and nonprescription opioid drugs. All ages and communities everywhere are affected by opioid addiction. Here is information from the American Academy of Pediatrics about opioid use and what parents and caregivers need to know.

### What are opioids?

Opioids are a category of highly addictive narcotic drugs. They include prescription pain medicine and illegal substances like heroin. Opioids are a class of drugs, either synthetic or semisynthetic versions, of the opium produced in small amounts by opium poppy plants. Examples of opioid medication used nonmedically include oxycodone, fentanyl, hydrocodone, dihydrocodeine, codeine, and morphine. Large doses can slow the body's heart and breathing rates to the point of stopping completely.

### How does opioid use affect babies, children, and teens?

- **Opioid addiction breaks apart families.** Nonmedical use of opioids affects the entire family. Families may be broken apart when a parent is arrested and sent to jail for buying or selling opioids. Parents who develop addiction may be unable to prioritize the needs of their family and children.
- **Prenatal exposure to opioids and NOWS.** Babies exposed to opioids during pregnancy can be born with neonatal opioid withdrawal syndrome (NOWS). Federal reports show that a baby with NOWS is born every 15 minutes. Facing lengthy hospital stays, babies with NOWS are more likely to have low birth weight, trouble breathing, and difficulty eating. They may also experience seizures and tremors. Doctors encourage pregnant people who use opioids to reach out for treatment, recovery care, and other services.
- **Opioid poisoning and overdose.** Nearly 9,000 children and adolescents in the United States died from opioid poisonings between 1999 and 2016, at a rate that nearly tripled. Most were teens, but there were also steady increases in opioid-related deaths among younger children. Research shows that opioids are the most common substance contributing to fatal poisonings of children 5 years and younger.

## 5 Things Parents Can Do About Nonmedical Opioid Use

### 1. Talk with your kids about drug use.

Children who learn about the risks of drugs at home are less likely to use drugs than those who don't learn this at home. Start talking about medication safety early by advising young children not to take any pills without asking first.

As children grow older and are more likely to view images of alcohol and drug use in media and advertisements, use those opportunities to open a conversation. Ask your child to explain what they know about alcohol and drugs, and use simple language to explain your rules around alcohol and drugs and that they are harmful and can sometimes result in injury, overdose, or death. As children grow into teens, ask them about what they see at school or with their peers. Share information about the risks of drug and alcohol, and continue to reinforce your rules and expectations around alcohol and drug use.

Make sure your teen understands the legal problems with sharing opioid medications. Also emphasize that many pills that are supposedly prescription drugs are illicitly manufactured and contaminated with fentanyl. Likewise, other substances, such as cannabis, may also be adulterated with opioids.

## **2. Store medicines safely, and dispose of leftover prescriptions.**

Keep opioids and other prescription medicine up and away in a secure place. Count and monitor the number of pills you have and lock them up. Do not allow your child or teen unsupervised access to these medications. Never let your child take someone else's prescription medication. In 2021, nearly half (45%) of people 12 years and older who used pain relievers nonmedically said these were given by, bought from, or taken from a friend or relative.

Also be sure to return leftover prescriptions to a hospital, doctor's office, or pharmacy. Many communities offer "take-back" events to collect unused prescription medications.

## **3. If your child is in pain, work with their doctor to create a safe pain management plan.**

If your child has a surgical procedure, you may be concerned about how to help your child manage pain and discomfort. Many people believe opioids work best for pain. However, recent studies show that non-opioid medicines such as ibuprofen and naproxen, as well as nonmedical approaches, can be just as effective. Your child's doctor may suggest trying certain complementary and integrative treatments, like acupuncture, as a first step for treating and managing chronic pain.

If your child continues to have severe pain, their doctor may prescribe a pain reliever that contains an opioid. If your child is prescribed an opioid, it is important to monitor your child's use of it. It should be taken exactly as prescribed and for the shortest time necessary. Also consider talking with the doctor about co-prescribing naloxone, which can prevent opioid overdose deaths, whenever an opioid is prescribed.

## **4. Ask for help if your child is using opioids nonmedically.**

If you think you or your child may be using opioids nonmedically, or any medication nonmedically, don't hesitate to seek help. Your child's pediatrician can explain how medication treatment can help teen and young adult patients with opioid use disorders, or they can refer these patients to other professionals who can help. Similar treatment is available for pregnant individuals with opioid use disorder.

## **5. Know what to do in an opioid overdose emergency.**

Naloxone is available without a prescription. Ask your child's pediatrician about using naloxone in an overdose emergency. Learn the signs of a possible overdose, such as difficult and shallow breathing, severe sleepiness, and not being able to wake up. Always call 911 if you believe someone is experiencing an overdose, even if you give them naloxone.

Visit [www.HealthyChildren.org](http://www.HealthyChildren.org) for more information.

Source: American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Substance Use and Prevention. *Pediatric Patient Education* handout adapted from [HealthyChildren.org](http://HealthyChildren.org) article "The Opioid Epidemic: How to Protect Your Family" (12/5/2023).

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