Opioids

The opioid overdose crisis has had a heavy impact on people living in the United States and has resulted in many preventable deaths across Minnesota and the rest of the nation. Because the opioid epidemic has reached all of our communities, it is important to learn ways that we can prevent additional opioid overdoses.
This resource provides information that individuals and families can use as they unite with their local communities to reduce substance use and abuse.

What is addiction?

Substance use disorder (SUD), commonly called addiction, is a chronic disease like diabetes, high blood pressure or asthma.

- Addiction is not a matter of personality, willpower or weakness.
- Anyone can become addicted.
- Drug addiction (substance use disorder) is a disease that affects the structure of the brain and people's behavior.
- Experimenting with recreational drugs or prescribed pain medication can lead to drug dependence or addiction.

What are opioids?

The US Department of Health and Human Services define opioids as '... a class of drugs that include legal drugs to reduce pain (such as oxycodone, hydrocodone, codeine, and morphine) and also include the illegal drug heroin and synthetic opioids such as fentanyl.'

- Prescription opioids are generally safe when used for a short time and as prescribed by a clinician.
- People can become addicted to both prescription opioids and illegal opioids.
- Both legal and illegal opioids can lead to drug dependence, addiction, overdose and death.

Misusing opioids can include not following instructions from your doctor, taking pills that are not prescribed for you or taking opioids to get high.

What is fentanyl?

Fentanyl is a powerful synthetic opioid that is roughly 100 times more potent than morphine and 50 times more potent than some forms of heroin.

- Other illicit drugs can be laced with fentanyl, unknown to the user.
- This can cause unintentional overdoses because fentanyl is so potent.
- Fentanyl test strips (FTS) can help prevent drug overdose deaths by identifying substances that contain fentanyl before they are used. Learn more about FTS and where to get them.

To learn more about fentanyl and harm reduction approaches, complete our fentanyl mini-course. Upon completing this mini-course, you will be able to:

1. Explain the difference between fentanyl/fentanyl analogs and other types of opioids
2. Explain why overdose risk is higher when illicit fentanyl is involved
3. Explain how harm reduction methods can reduce the risk of overdose related to fentanyl.

Begin the fentanyl mini-course

Is it dangerous to mix opioids with other drugs?

Mixing opioids with other drugs can cause dangerous side effects including difficulty breathing, coma, brain damage and death.

If you are taking prescription pain medications, do NOT take the following without first talking to your health care provider:

- Alcohol (including beer, wine and liquor)
- Antihistamines (including allergy medications such as Benadryl®)
- Cough medicine/cough syrup
- Barbiturates, benzodiazepines (often used as sleeping pills and sedatives, such as Ambien®, Xanax®, and Valium®), and other drugs that cause sedation or

respiratory depression
- General anesthetics (often used for surgery)

How do opioids work?

Opioids travel through the blood and attach to receptors in the brain. Opioids can block pain, cause sensations of pleasure like calmness or happiness, and slow heart and breathing rates.

How do you know if you are addicted to opioids?

The signs and symptoms of addiction can be physical, behavioral and psychological. The Mayo Clinic describes symptoms of drug addiction as the following:

- Continuing to use increased amounts of the drug to achieve the same effect
- Continuing to use the drug, even though it is harming your physical and mental health
- Engaging in risky behaviors such as driving or stealing when under the influence of the drug
- Avoiding social activities or missing work
- Interfering with relationships
- Using the most of your time to get the drug, use the drug, or recover from the effects of the drug
- Struggling with your attempts to stop using the drug
- Experiencing withdrawal symptoms

Why is it so hard to stop using opioids?

For some people, their brains are more susceptible to addiction and it makes it harder to quit using.

Sources

National Institute on Drug Abuse. (n.d.) *The body's response to opioids*.

National Institute on Drug Abuse. (2018). *Understanding drug use and addiction*.

National Institute on Drug Abuse (2019). *What is fentanyl?*

US Department of Health & Human Services. (2018). *What are opioids?*