Overdose

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 FAQ resource provides information that individuals and families can use as they unite with their local communities to reduce substance use and abuse.

What are the signs and symptoms of an opioid overdose?

The CDC has outlined the following guidance to help prevent an opioid overdose:

An overdose can dangerously slow or stop breathing. This can cause brain damage or death. It's important to recognize the signs and **act fast**. Signs of an overdose can include:

- Falling asleep or loss of consciousness (inability to rouse)
- Slow, shallow breathing (less than 12 breaths per minute)
- Choking or gurgling sounds
- Limp body
- Pale, blue, or cold skin
- Small pupils

If I think someone is overdosing, what should I do?

It may be hard to tell if a person is high or experiencing an overdose. If you aren't sure, it's best to treat it like an overdose.

1. Immediately call 911.
2. Administer naloxone, if available.

3. Try to keep the person awake and breathing.
4. Lay the person on their side to prevent choking.
5. Stay with the person until emergency workers arrive.

How do I discard unused or expired medications?

The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has developed the following guidance on how to discard unused or expired medications:

- Drug take back sites are the best way to dispose of most types of old, unused, unwanted or expired medicines (both prescription and over the counter) in a safe and environmentally protective way.
- If there is not a drug take back site in your area, you can look at the FDA flush list. If your medication is listed on the FDA flush list and if you do *not* use a septic tank, you can flush these medicines down the toilet.
- If your medication is not listed or you use a septic tank you should discard the medicine in the trash by:
    - Mix the medicines (liquid or pills; do not crush tablets or capsules) with an unappealing substance such as dirt, cat litter or used coffee grounds;
    - Place the mixture in a container such as a sealed plastic bag;
    - Throw away the container in your trash at home; and
    - Remove all personal information on the prescription label of empty medicine bottles or medicine packaging, then trash or recycle the empty bottle or packaging as appropriate.
- National Drug Take Back Day is held twice a year in both April and October. To participate, look for a collection site near you.
- The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency has an interactive map to help you find a nearby collection site. Enter your zip code and adjust the distance. Most collection bins are located indoors and accessible during normal business hours.

What is stigma?

Stigma is a negative attitude towards a specific group of people. Stigma towards addiction can prevent people from getting the help they need. It can also lead to

feelings of shame and isolation. Family members of those with a substance use disorder can also experience stigma, leading to feelings of guilt and embarrassment. Stigma may also be a barrier for family members to seek the support and resources they need.

We can reduce stigma by recognizing our own underlying biases and assumptions. Common assumptions about substance use disorders include beliefs that substance use disorders are a moral failing, that people addicted to opioids lack self-discipline and that addiction is caused by poor choices. An important first step to combat stigma is to use “people-first” language that is respectful, compassionate, and focuses on the individual-- not the action. Remember that:

- Addiction is a chronic health condition, like diabetes, high blood pressure or asthma. It is not a moral failing or a conscious choice. Because of this, there are rescue medications (Naloxone) and longer-term treatments (medication-assisted treatment or MAT) for this condition.
- There are factors outside of a person’s control that contribute to addiction, such as injury, trauma or mental health challenges.
- Effective treatment exists, but recovery is an on-going, lifelong effort.
- For many people, recurrent relapse (a return to substance use) is part of the process.
- The language we use when we talk about substance use disorders matters.

How do I talk to kids about an overdose death?

The death of any loved one or friend can bring with it many different and unexpected emotions. However, when someone dies from an overdose the connection to substance use disorder (SUD) and associated stigma can create additional layers of complex emotions, making the death especially difficult to talk about and process.

The death of a loved one from an overdose is an adverse childhood experience (ACE), and it is a time where children may have lots of thoughts and feeling. Use these tips and examples about age-appropriate ways to talk to kids when there is a death from an overdose. A shorter and simpler version is also available to print and share.

Sources

Centers for Disease Control. (n.d.) *Preventing an opioid overdose*.

National Institute on Drug Abuse. (2020). *What is naloxone?*

US Food & Drug Administration. (nd). *Disposal of unused medication: What you should know.*