



Guidebook for supporting someone in opioid recovery



Family and friends can play an important role in a person's recovery.

You've probably heard people talking about the "opioid epidemic." Opioid use is a widespread problem. In fact, more than two million Americans have become dependent or have used prescription paid medications other than prescribed.

But opioid use doesn't just affect those who use. It also impacts their friends, family and loved ones.

This guidebook is for those who care for someone with an opioid problem. Read on to learn more about opioid use disorder, treatment and how to care for yourself.



Contents

- What are opioids?** 4
- Understanding opioid misuse** 5-6
- Warning signs and things to look for** 7
- Treatment options** 8
- Caring for yourself** 9-10
- Resources** 11





What are opioids?

Opioids are drugs that connect to the brain and spinal cord, interrupting pain signals. They also set off reward centers of the brain. Opioids help doctors and patients manage pain or suppress coughs by sending signals to the brain that:

- Block pain
- Create a feeling of calm
- Slow breathing

People often think opioids are safe to use because doctors prescribe them. But they can be highly addictive. And they should only be used under the close care of a doctor.

Common opioids

Opioids are sometimes referred to as “narcotics.”

Common prescription opioids include:

- Morphine
- Vicodin*
- Percocet*
- OxyContin*
- Hydrocodone
- Oxycodone

The illicit versions of opioids include heroin and fentanyl.

The short- and long-term effects of opioids

Opioids not only block pain, they may also cause a “high.” Faster-acting opioids lead to a more intense high. In the short-term, people who use opioids can experience:²

- Pain relief
- Calm
- Sleepiness
- Joy

When people use opioids over a longer period of time, they may also experience some of these effects:²

- Nausea and vomiting
- Increased tolerance
- Bloating and constipation
- Dependence
- Liver damage

Opioid use may also cause side effects like nausea and low energy.²

Nearly 108,000 people died of drug overdoses in 2021.¹

¹Opioid Crisis Fast Facts. CNN. Accessed March 2023.

²The Effects of Opiate Use. DrugAbuse.Com. Accessed March 2023.

³Opioid overdose symptoms and treatment. American Addiction Centers. Accessed March 2023.

Opioid overdose

Despite the associated happy feeling, opioids are considered “downers.” They can cause drowsiness and fatigue because they slow the body down. Opioids are dangerous because they also slow down breathing. In large doses, opioids can cause you to stop breathing, leading to death.

When people get addicted to opioids, they can develop a tolerance to the drug. This means they need to use more of the drug to achieve the same result. Taking large doses of opioids or combining them with other “downers,” like alcohol, can lead to overdose and death.

When someone overdoses on opioids, they may experience:³

- Confusion
- Slow, irregular or no breathing
- Repeated vomiting
- Cold, clammy skin
- Pinpoint pupils
- Bluish skin around the lips and under fingernails
- Loss of consciousness

An average of 115 people in the U.S. die from an opioid overdose each day.¹ But new, potentially lifesaving drugs are being released to the public to help address opioid misuse. Find out more by talking to your doctor.





Understanding opioid misuse

You may be wondering how opioid misuse happens. After all, opioids are a safe and appropriate treatment for severe pain. And doctors wouldn't prescribe them if they weren't okay, right?

It's important to understand how things like drug tolerance, physical dependence and addiction work. Sometimes people misuse these terms. And this can be confusing. But understanding these terms can give you a better understanding of how opioid misuse can happen.

What is tolerance?

When people use a drug, their bodies can build up a tolerance to it. This means they have to use more of the drug to get the same effect. The same holds true for opioids.

What is physical dependence?

People sometimes use the terms "dependence" and "addiction" as if they mean the same thing. In fact, it's possible to be physically dependent on a drug and not be addicted to it. Physical dependence is the body's natural response to opioid use. And it doesn't require substance use treatment if opioids are taken correctly.

After taking opioids, your body adapts to the drug. This means your body may stop creating its own natural

opioids. So if you stop taking the drug, your body will be confused. It won't be able to keep up with its new demand for opioids. And you will experience withdrawal symptoms. These may include:⁴

- Stomach problems
- Sweating
- Chills
- Feeling anxious and "on edge"
- Aches and pains
- Hypersensitivity to pain
- Depression
- Insomnia
- Yawning

Withdrawal looks different for different people. And symptoms often show up as the opposite of what the drug was doing for you. For example, if the opioid suppressed depressed feelings and caused you to feel joy and euphoria, you might experience depression when you quit taking it.

Withdrawal can be dangerous. So it's important to go off opioids with a doctor's supervision and guidance.

⁴Opioid addiction. The National Alliance of Advocates for Buprenorphine Treatment. Accessed March 2023.



What is opioid use disorder?

Substance use disorder is different from physical dependence. It's a disorder of the brain. Opioid use disorder is marked by:

- Craving opioids
- Spending a lot of time seeking out, using or recovering from opioid use
- Continuing to take opioids even after the physical pain is gone and there's no practical use for it
- Taking opioids even when they cause problems in the person's life

Opioid use disorder looks different for everyone. But there are some common factors for people who struggle with this. They may:

- Have physical or emotional pain they're trying to cope with through their opioid use
- Have a physical dependence on the drug
- Crave opioids long after they've quit
- Start with prescription opioid misuse before moving on to heroin or fentanyl use

Why do some people develop substance use disorder?

Not everyone who uses opioids develops an opioid substance use disorder. It's different for everyone. And there are often both genetic and environmental factors at play. Risk factors include:

- Genetics
- Family history of substance misuse
- Early drug use
- Lack of social support
- Stressful life events
- Other mental health issues

And, believe it or not, cutting back on opioids on your own can increase your risk of developing opioid misuse disorder.⁵ You may have been using opioids long enough that you have a physical dependence on them. So when you cut back, you may experience terrible pain and withdrawal. And then you take the opioid again and feel relief. This cycle can condition you in a way that leads to misuse.

⁵[Avoiding addiction when powerful opioid painkillers are needed](#). Harvard Health Publishing. Accessed March 2023.

Preventing opioid use disorder

Many people take opioids safely and without problems. If your doctor prescribes opioids, be sure to:

- Take them as instructed
- Talk to your doctor about any concerns
- Meet with your doctor about any withdrawal symptoms or if you think you may need a higher dose.
- Make a plan with your doctor about tapering off the drug

If you're concerned about opioid misuse, treatment is available. People can and do recover from opioid use disorder.





Warning signs and things to look for

Opioid use disorder can take over a person's life. Catching opioid misuse early may help make recovery easier. But people who misuse opioids often try to hide their use. So it can help to know how to recognize the warning signs.

Physical signs of opioid misuse

If you're concerned about someone misusing opioids, watch for these physical signs:^{6,7}

- Small, "pinpoint" pupils that don't respond to changes in light
- Extreme fatigue, sleeping more than usual or "nodding off" during normal activities
- Flushed, itchy skin
- Needle marks on arms and legs
- Constipation
- Nausea
- Slowed breathing

You should also pay attention to possible withdrawal symptoms. These often show up as flu-like symptoms.

Behavioral signs of opioid misuse

When people are in distress, it often shows up in their mood and actions. Even if they're able to hide the physical symptoms, there will often be changes in their behavior. Someone misusing opioids may exhibit:⁷

- Loss of interest in usual activities
- Unexpected mood swings

- Impulsive actions and decision-making
- Risky behavior, such as driving under the influence
- Visiting multiple doctors in order to obtain more prescriptions

Signs of opioid overdose

Opioid overdose can be dangerous. In fact, each day about 115 people in the United States die from an opioid overdose.¹

When someone overdoses on opioids, they may experience:³

- Obvious confusion
- Repeated vomiting
- Pinpoint pupils
- Loss of consciousness
- Slow, irregular or no breathing
- Cold, clammy skin

What to do

If someone you know may be misusing opioids, reach out. Let the person know you care. And then offer support. You can offer to help the person connect with a doctor or therapist. Remember, you can't make someone seek recovery.

You may be able to access medication to help counteract an overdose. Find out more by talking to your doctor or pharmacist.

And you can always reach out to us. We're here for you 24/7/365. If you're concerned about opioid misuse, give us a call.

¹Opioid Crisis Fast Facts. CNN. Accessed March 2023.

³Symptoms of Opioid Overdose: Vicodin, OxyContin, and Morphine. American Addiction Centers. Accessed March 2023.

⁶Signs of Opiate Abuse. Addiction Center. Accessed March 2023.

⁷How Do I Know if Someone is on Opiates? The Recovery Village. Accessed March 2023.



When people are in distress, it often shows up in their mood and actions.

Treatment options



Treatment for opioid use disorder can be difficult and is often long-term. Treatment must not only address the physical dependence, but also the mental and emotional side.

Detoxification

For many, the first stage in treatment is detoxification (detox). This is the period in which the body gets rid of the drugs and harmful toxins in the person's system.

The person will likely go through withdrawal during detox. Withdrawal symptoms can be hard to cope with. People may want to resume their opioid use to make the symptoms go away. And in some cases, withdrawal can be dangerous. So it's important to detox under a doctor's supervision.

Doctors can help patients cope with withdrawal and taper off the opioids. Detox programs help people come off opioids safely and smartly. Depending on the person and the opioid history, professional detox may be inpatient or outpatient.

Different treatments

There are a lot of treatment options. They include:

- **Medication.** Some prescription medicines can help people cope with withdrawal, reduce cravings and/or manage mood issues like depression. They're most effective when paired with therapy.
- **Outpatient treatment.** Outpatient treatment allows patients to stay in their homes while still meeting regularly with a therapist.
- **Intensive outpatient.** This treatment offers more frequent services than outpatient treatment. The person lives at home and attends therapy three to five times a week.
- **Inpatient treatment.** Inpatient treatment is generally used for detox and/or people who need constant

medical supervision. Inpatient care can help people get stable. They may start medication-assisted treatment and begin to develop new skills to help them cope.

- **Community support.** Groups like Narcotics Anonymous can provide free support and often supplement other types of outpatient treatment programs.

Choosing treatment

Finding a program that meets a person's needs can be a challenge. There are general hospitals, substance use specialty programs, residential programs and outpatient treatment. Many of these programs are skilled at promoting and marketing their services. But that doesn't mean they're better. And they may request thousands of dollars in payment before treatment begins.

If you're searching for treatment options, you can:

- Ask your doctor for a referral
- Call your insurance company to find out who is in network and what is covered (going out of network may significantly increase the cost)
- Look for local providers if possible. Programs close to home help families and friends participate in the recovery process
- Visit the [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration's Find Treatment](#) web page

Treatment for opioid use disorder takes time and hard work. But people can recover and go on to live happy, healthy lives.



Treatment options



Learn about substance use disorder and recovery

It's normal to feel angry and hopeless when a loved one struggles with opioid misuse. You might blame your loved one or yourself. When you know how addiction works, it can help you cope. You may better understand:

- Substance use disorder is an illness, not a choice
- You can't fix someone else
- Recovery takes time
- Relapses may happen
- Family therapy can be important

Build resilience

Recovery often includes setbacks. And these can be hard. When you build a healthier you, it's easier to cope with those hard times. Here are some ideas:

- **Meet with a peer support group.** Talking to others in the same boat can help you feel less alone.

- **Do things you enjoy.** Start a new hobby or get back to one you used to like.
- **Find new meaning.** Look for volunteer opportunities and get involved in passion projects.
- **Take care of your health.** Stress is hard on your body. Eat well, exercise and get plenty of sleep.

You can also find support with a local Nar-Anon group. Nar-Anon provides support for family and friends of those who experience addiction. Locate a Nar-Anon group near you at nar-anon.org.

You may feel as if you have to carry the burden of your loved one's illness. But with work, you can take care of yourself and find a place of well-being. You're not alone.

Healing yourself helps you and supports your loved one's recovery



Resources



Call us any time for in-the-moment support. We're here for you 24/7/365. For more information and support, you can explore some of these programs:

- **Nar-Anon**
Helps friends and family of those with substance use disorder. Find a local group at nar-anon.org.
- **Partnership for Drug-Free Kids**
Provides information, expert tips, treatment options and more. Visit them at drugfree.org or call their hotline at **1-855-378-4373**. You can also sign up for [text support](#) if your child is struggling with opioid use.
- **National Institute on Drug Abuse**
Find information on opioids, choosing a treatment provider and what to do when you're worried about drug use.
- **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration (SAMHSA)**
Visit [Samhsa.gov](https://samhsa.gov) to get information about opioid use disorder, treatment and recovery. You can also go to their treatment service locator at findtreatment.gov or by calling the treatment referral line at **1-800-662-HELP(4357)** TTY: **1-800-487-4889**.
- **National Family Caregiver Support Program**
This program helps support grandparents who are caring for their grandchildren. Recipients can find information at [Paying for Senior Care](#) or by contacting your local [Area Agency on Aging](#).
- **Grandfamilies.org**
This site acts as a legal resource for grandparents and their grandchildren.
- **Suicide & Crisis Lifeline**
Drug misuse can sometimes lead to thoughts of suicide. Find support by visiting suicidepreventionlifeline.org or by calling **988** or for those with trouble hearing, send a text message to **988 or TTY 711 then 988**.



You may feel as if you have to carry the burden of your loved one's opioid misuse. But you are not alone. Let us help you find hope.

We're here for you 24/7. Call or visit us online for more information and resources.

Reach out to **988** if you're experiencing a mental health or suicide crisis.



For legal disclaimers, scan the QR code or visit [rfl.com/Disclaimers](https://www.rfl.com/Disclaimers).

©2024 Resources For Living
1176800-01-02-ABH (1/24)

