



OPIOIDS:

what you and your friends need to know



You may have heard people talking about opioids and fentanyl in the news lately.

Here's what you need to know.



Bottom Line

Opioid misuse can be very dangerous, and even deadly. The risk of overdose is high. With fentanyl, even small amounts can kill. Because it is sometimes mixed into other street drugs, you may not even know you are taking it.

What are prescription opioids?

Prescription opioids are powerful drugs used to relieve severe pain. There are two types of opioid medications:

- “Over-the-counter” opioids that you can buy at a pharmacy without first visiting a doctor (like Tylenol 1) that are used to treat minor aches and pains like headaches, toothaches, and fevers.
- Opioids that are prescribed by a doctor or dentist to relieve medium to severe pain (like after surgery or getting your wisdom teeth pulled).

What is fentanyl?

Fentanyl is an extremely strong opioid that is prescribed for people with the most severe pain, such as people with cancer. It can be a spray, tablet, or patch and should only be used under medical supervision.

What is opioid misuse?

Using opioids that haven't been prescribed to you by a doctor, or using opioids differently than prescribed (e.g., taking more of them, or using them to feel high rather than for pain relief).

How often are opioids misused by Ontario students?

Last year in Ontario, 701 people between the ages of 15 and 24 went to emergency departments and 164 were hospitalized because of opioids. In 2015, 730 people (all ages) died because of opioids. 8% of Grades 7 and 8 students and 10% of high school students said they used prescription opioids without a prescription at least once in the past year.

Are opioids legal?

It is illegal for anyone without a prescription to possess or use prescription opioids. Giving opioids to another person can be considered trafficking, even if no money changes hands.



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DANGERS & SIGNS



What are the risks of using prescription opioids?

- Opioids slow down the part of the brain that controls breathing. Too high a dose can cause breathing to stop and the person to die.
- People who use opioids regularly to feel high soon develop “tolerance.” This means they must use more of the drug to get the same effect. This increases the risk of overdose.
- If people with tolerance stop taking the drug, they lose their tolerance quite quickly. If they then start taking the same amount again, there is a high risk of overdose.

Signs of an opioid problem:

- changes in energy, sleep, or appetite
- changes in friends or hangout locations
- stealing, borrowing money, or having extra cash
- craving the drug all or most of the time
- losing control over use
- personality or mood changes

Signs of overdose:

- slow breathing or no breathing
- bluish skin, lips and fingernails
- coma—the person won't wake up
- snoring or gurgling sounds
- pupils are tiny, or eyes are rolled back
- vomiting

An overdose can cause death, usually because breathing stops. If caught in time, it can be treated with medications such as naloxone, which reverse the effects of opioids.

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GETTING HELP

If you or a friend need help, the first step is to talk to someone you trust. You can approach a **teacher, coach, guidance counsellor, parent, doctor, or nurse**.

THE FIRST STEP:

If you're not ready to talk to someone you know, you can talk or chat online with a counsellor at the Kids Help Phone. (**1-800-668-6868** www.kidshelpphone.ca)

- Counsellors understand the issues facing young adults.
- They will not judge you.
- Your call is private, you do not need to tell them your name if you don't want to.
- They can also provide you with information on where to go and who to talk to if you want more help, including support and treatment for a problem with opioids.

IN AN EMERGENCY

If you witness someone who you think is having an overdose, call 911 immediately.

This could be a life-or-death situation.

What is naloxone?

Naloxone (pronounced na-LOX-own) is a medication that can help someone who has overdosed to breathe normally and regain consciousness if used right away. However, the effects of naloxone are temporary and shorter than the effects of opioids so a person who overdoses must be taken immediately to the hospital for treatment. In addition, the lack of oxygen to the brain for a period of time can have harmful effects.



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4 facts about opioids:

1. **Using opioids (prescribed or not) before or while driving is very much like drinking and driving.** Opioids can slow your reflexes, make you drowsy or lose control of the car.
2. **All opioids can cause an overdose, even if you take them just once!** Mixing opioids with alcohol or other drugs is a dangerous combination that can kill you.
3. **There is a risk of addiction whether the opioids are prescribed or not.** When opioids are prescribed, a person is monitored by their doctor and pharmacist to make sure they don't develop any problems.
4. **Fentanyl has been found in fake prescription pills** (which are made to look like prescription pain relievers) and other street drugs (like ecstasy, cocaine, and heroin). It does not have a color, taste or smell, so you can't tell if you are taking it.

Adapted with permission from CAMH's Youth and prescription painkillers.



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TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

True or False?

1. Prescription pills are safe for anyone to use because they have been prescribed by a doctor.
2. You can get addicted to prescription opioids even though a doctor has to prescribe them.
3. Everyone is taking prescription pills for fun.
4. Using someone else's prescription drugs is legal.
5. If you used a drug one time without harm, it is safe to do again.

ANSWERS:

1. **FALSE.** It's never safe to use medicine that has been prescribed for someone else. Even if you are prescribed an opioid painkiller, it can be deadly to crush the pills, use more than prescribed or to mix it with alcohol or other drugs.
2. **TRUE.** Opioids are very strong medications that may lead to addiction, whether or not they are prescribed.
3. **FALSE.** Most people are not. In 2015, only one in ten Ontario students said they had used prescription drugs to get high at least once in the past year.
4. **FALSE.** Using someone else's prescription drugs is against the law. If they are found in your locker or car, you can be charged with possession of drugs. You can also be charged if you give one of your own prescription pills to a friend or sell them to others.
5. **FALSE.** Your tolerance to a drug can go up and down based on many factors. In addition, some illegal drugs can be manufactured to look like prescription medicine – meaning that you don't always know what you are taking or how strong it is.



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