

# Opioids:

## What You Need to Know

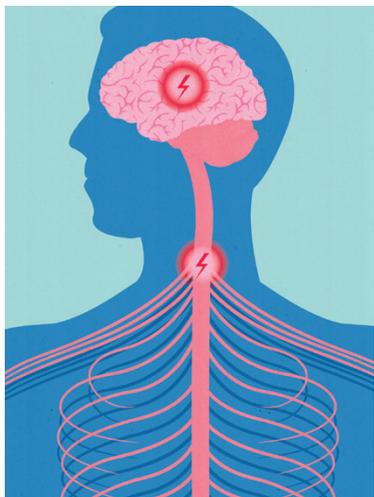
**A** SERIOUS HEALTH CRISIS is threatening the United States. Over the past 10 years, the number of deaths from taking too much of a drug (overdoses) have increased dramatically. The majority of these deaths are linked to **opioids** (pronounced *OH-pee-oyds*). On average, 130 Americans die every day from an opioid overdose.

Opioids are a category of powerful pain relievers that include prescription pain medications as well as illegal drugs like heroin. Recently, there has been a surge in synthetic (man-made) opioids such as fentanyl (*FENT-uh-nul*) being illegally imported. The illegal version of fentanyl is a major contributor to the current crisis. Fentanyl is extremely powerful—50 times stronger than heroin, an opioid made in parts from natural ingredients. Even a very small amount of fentanyl can cause a deadly overdose.

### What are the dangers?

Doctors prescribe legal opioids to treat severe pain. The drugs have powerful effects on the body, but if





**Misusing opioids poses serious health risks. If someone takes too much of an opioid, they could overdose and stop breathing. Opioids are also highly addictive.**

they are misused, they pose serious health risks. Not only do opioids block pain but they also cause a person's breathing to slow. If someone has an overdose, they could stop breathing. The rise of powerful opioids like fentanyl has made these overdose deaths more common.

Opioids are also highly addictive. Over time, misusing the drugs, such as taking them for reasons other than to treat pain, can change how the brain works and make someone crave the drugs. A person can develop *opioid use disorder*, the most severe form of which is *addiction*. Addiction is a disease that causes people to continue to use drugs, even if they want to stop.

## Staying safe

The best way to avoid the dangers of opioids is simply not to use them. But sometimes, having surgery or a serious injury causes severe pain that can only be relieved with strong medications. A doctor may

prescribe an opioid such as codeine, morphine, Vicodin (also known as hydrocodone), or OxyContin (also known as oxycodone). To reduce the risks associated with using opioids, follow these precautions.

- » If you or someone in your family is prescribed a pain medication, ask your doctor if it contains an opioid. Talk about the risks, and ask if there are alternative treatments you could consider.
- » If anyone in your family is prescribed an opioid and also has a history of drug use, addiction, or mental illness, tell the doctor immediately. These factors can increase a person's risk for opioid addiction.
- » Above all, always take opioids exactly the way your doctor prescribed them, and never use them for any other reason. Never share medications with anyone else. If you have leftover pills, talk to your doctor about how to get rid of them safely. You can find programs that take back unused medications at [bit.ly/2MLXiUW](http://bit.ly/2MLXiUW).

## WHAT TO DO

### FOR OVERDOSE

- » Signs of an overdose include limp body, pale face, slow breathing and heartbeat, blue fingernails or lips, vomiting, or inability to talk.
- » If you see someone who has these symptoms, call 911 immediately. Emergency responders can give naloxone to the patient, which can reverse the effects of an opioid overdose. If it is given in time, it can save someone's life.
- » In most states, naloxone is available from pharmacies without an individual prescription. This means that any bystander can buy and administer it to someone who is having an opioid overdose.

### FOR ADDICTION

- » Addiction is a disease, and people suffering from it need medical support. If someone addicted to opioids tries to stop using the drugs, that person may have severe cravings, seizures, trembling, and nausea. These are known as withdrawal symptoms.
- » Medications are available to reduce the symptoms of addiction and help people who are trying to recover. Medications help a person stop misusing opioids and can restore balance to brain circuits altered by the person's disorder.
- » People who use these medications are more likely to stay off opioids, reducing the risk of overdose.