

**Office of Integrated Health  
Health & Safety Information**

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## **Opioid Use Disorder (OUD) Health & Safety Alert**

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### **FACT:**

Opioid misuse represents a unique challenge to our health care system. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), an average of 130 Americans die every day from an opioid overdose (CDC, 2018). Opioids include both prescription drugs such as hydrocodone, oxycodone, morphine, and illegal drugs such as heroin and synthetic fentanyl. While many people benefit from using prescription opioids medications to manage pain, prescription drugs are frequently diverted for improper use. Sometimes a person's doctor will stop refilling prescription opioids which leads them to finding illegal opioids like heroin or synthetic fentanyl on the street (Phillips, Ford & Bonnie, 2017).

*As a result of the consequences of the opioid crisis affecting our Nation, on this date and after consultation with public health officials as necessary, I, Eric D. Hargan, Acting Secretary of Health and Human Services, pursuant to the authority vested in me under section 319 of the Public Health Service Act, do hereby determine that a public health emergency exists nationwide (Hargan, 2017).*

### **What is an Opioid?**

- ❖ Opioids are a controlled class of drugs that includes prescription pain relievers such as oxycodone (OxyContin®), hydrocodone (Vicodin®), codeine, morphine, and many others (CDC, 2018).
- ❖ Illegal opioids drugs are heroin, and synthetic fentanyl and other opioids.
- ❖ Opioids are prescribed to treat pain.
- ❖ With prolonged use, pain-relieving effects may lessen and pain can become worse.
- ❖ When used correctly under a health care provider's direction, prescription pain medicines are helpful. However, misusing prescription opioids risks dependence and addiction.

- ❖ When attempting to reduce or stop the use of opioids some people experience withdrawal symptoms, which makes it difficult to stop taking them on their own.
- ❖ Treatment for withdrawal symptoms vary but do assist with discontinuing the use of opioid drugs. Medications such as methadone, buprenorphine, Suboxone, or naltrexone can help alleviate the symptoms of withdrawal and cravings. Pairing medication management with inpatient treatment or community support programs generally have the most success. Many people find it helpful to attend a 12-step community support group, such as Narcotics Anonymous (NA) (Didden, 2017).

### **What is the addictive nature of Opioids?**

- ❖ The initial decision to take opioid drugs is voluntary for most people, but can lead to craving in the brain which interferes with a person ability to resist taking the drug.
- ❖ As people use opioids repeatedly, their tolerance increases and they need higher doses of the drug to achieve the same effect.
- ❖ Addiction occurs when dependence interferes with daily living leading to serious life problems. Taking more than the prescribed amount or using illegal opioids like heroin may result in death caused by overdose (National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), 2019).

### **What are the signs and symptoms when a person is using Opioids?**

- ❖ They have difficulty staying awake, keeping their eyes open, and nodding their heads like they're falling asleep.
- ❖ They think and move very slowly, and feel like they're in a dream.
- ❖ They slur their words, and have a hard time speaking clearly.
- ❖ The pupil of the eyes, or the black center, are very small or pinpoint.
- ❖ They're breathing, heartbeat, and blood pressure all slow down.
- ❖ People who inject opioids have needle marks on their bodies (NIDA, 2019).

### **What are the signs and symptoms of withdrawal from Opioids?**

- ❖ When a person stops using opioid medications abruptly they could experience:
  - Itching feeling all over their body, sweating, and/or goose flesh
  - Muscle spasms, along with bone and muscle pain
  - Stomach cramps, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea
  - Increase heart beat and blood pressure
  - Increased anxiety and agitation
  - Runny nose and watery eyes
  - Enlarged pupils
  - Insomnia
  - Yawning (SAMHSA, 2015)

## What are some of the negative impacts of the OUD?

- ❖ The person may not be able to maintain the source for the drugs. This can cause them to turn to the black market or even switch from prescription drugs to cheaper and illegal substitutes like heroin. These substances vary in purity and strength, which increases the risk of serious medical complications or overdose (SAMHSA, 2015).
- ❖ Symptoms of addiction include uncontrollable cravings and/or the inability to control opioid use even though it's having negative effects on health, personal relationships, employment, finances or even criminal offenses (NIDA, 2019).

## Concerns around Intellectual/Developmental Disability and OUD

- ❖ More individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities are being exposed to illegal opioid drug use during their integration into our communities (Didden, 2017).
- ❖ Addiction is higher in people who have suffered physical or sexual trauma, neglect and/or abandonment. Many IDD individuals have experienced some type of trauma or abandonment in their lives adding to increased feelings of loneliness and sadness (Chapman and Wu, 2012).
- ❖ People with disabilities typically have lower levels of education, lower incomes, and higher rates of unemployment adding to their risk for developing an addiction. (Chapman and Wu, 2012).
- ❖ Individuals with mild or moderate IDD and/or an additional mental health issues are at greatest risk for opioid drug use due to their independence within the community and their tendency to self-medicate (Didden, 2017).
- ❖ Opioid use disorder is more difficult to identify in IDD individuals due to poor screening tools making the disorder more difficult to recognize. Few screening tools which have been adapted to the ID population (Didden, 2017).
- ❖ IDD individuals are less likely to receive treatment for OUD, and/or they will drop out of treatment programs early before completion (Didden, 2017).

## Resources

### Where can you get HELP and further education?

- ❖ If you or someone you know has a drug problem, you should try to find medical treatment. You can call this toll-free number at any time for drug and counseling treatment near you: 1-800-662-HELP (4357) (SAMHSA, 2015).
- ❖ If you're concerned about an IDD individual contact an IDD support coordinator at your local community service board for assistance. A list of community service boards are on the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services

(DBHDS) website: [http://www.dbhds.virginia.gov/community-services-boards-csbs\\_\(DBHDS, n.d.\)](http://www.dbhds.virginia.gov/community-services-boards-csbs_(DBHDS,_n.d.))

- ❖ These websites will help you find treatment and counseling near you:
  - [SAHMSA's Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator \(SAHMSA, n.d.-a\)](#)
  - [SAHMSA's State Agencies webpage \(SAHMSA, n.d.-b\)](#)
- ❖ Support groups also help:
  - [Alcoholics Anonymous \(AA\)](#)—for people with alcohol addiction. (Didden, 2017).
  - [Narcotics Anonymous \(NA\)](#)—for people with other drug addictions (Didden, 2017).
- ❖ REVIVE! is the Opioid Overdose and Naloxone Education (OONE) program for the Commonwealth of Virginia. Currently REVIVE! provides training on how to recognize and respond to an opioid overdose emergency with the administration of naloxone (Narcan®). Naloxone is a life-saving medication in the event of opioid overdose (DBHDS, 2019).
  - Rescuer trainings are between 1-1.5 hours long. This training covers understanding opioids, how opioid overdoses happen, risk factors for opioid overdoses, and how to respond to an opioid overdose emergency with the administration of Naloxone.
  - To find a schedule of trainings in your area and instructions on how to receive “no-cost” Naloxone please visit <http://www.dbhds.virginia.gov/behavioral-health/substance-abuse-services/revive> (DBHDS, 2019).

## Call the National Helpline

**1-800-662-HELP (4357)**

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Understanding the Epidemic

<https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/epidemic/>

Narcotics Anonymous (NA) World Services, Inc.

<https://www.na.org>

National Institute on Drug Abuse

<https://www.drugabuse.gov>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

<https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/atod>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

<https://www.hhs.gov/opioids/>

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