

Report to PARENTS

Preventing Opioid Overdose in Youth

In 2023, the U.S. recorded more than 40,000 emergency room visits for non-fatal drug overdoses in children under age 15. Each week, roughly 22 adolescents fatally overdose with most deaths attributable to opioids. Opioid overdoses can be caused by exposure to both prescription opioids (such as oxycodone, hydrocodone, morphine, and tramadol) and illicit or “street” opioids (such as fentanyl and heroin). Learn the role families play in opioid overdose prevention and management.

Common Ways Kids Are Exposed to Opioids

Opioids are the most prescribed medication used for managing pain in the U.S. Both prescribed and illicit opioids are prevalent in our communities. The most common ways kids encounter opioids include:

- Using them appropriately for medical issues.
- Accessing improperly stored sources within the home.
- Accidentally ingesting substances laced with illicit opioids—products resembling legitimate pharmaceutical drugs and herbal supplements purchased over the internet, including drugs for weight-loss or cognitive support (such as Ritalin and Adderall); and brightly colored “fentapills” designed to resemble children’s candy.
- Purchasing opioids through non-pharmaceutical routes such as the internet or social media.

Recognizing and Responding to an Overdose

An opioid overdose can happen to anyone, even if the drug is being taken in the recommended dose and route. Signs and symptoms of an opioid overdose are:

- Changes in responsiveness;
- Confusion;
- Appearing to be very tired or sleepy;
- Slow or shallow breathing; and
- Changes to lip or skin color.

If any of these features are present and an opioid overdose is suspected, call 911 immediately and deliver the opioid-overdose drug naloxone (Narcan®). Here’s some facts about naloxone families should know:

- It is safe to give to children of all ages.
- It will not harm the child, even if the cause of symptoms is not an overdose.



- It will immediately, but temporarily, reverse an overdose.
- It does not cause a “high” or addiction, and it has no potential for abuse.
- It is available over the counter or with a prescription from most pharmacies.

Ways to Help Prevent Opioid Overdoses

Most opioid overdoses are preventable. By taking a few proactive measures, families can limit unnecessary opioid exposure in their children and be prepared for worst-case scenarios. Here’s a list of important next steps:

- Lock up all prescription opioids.
- Immediately dispose of unused opioids. Visit DEA National Take Back for drug drop-off locations.
- Have naloxone on hand, especially if teenagers or prescription opioids are in the home.
- Talk to your kids about the risks: Illicit opioids commonly contaminate many other recreational drugs, and fake pills can be deadly.
- Know deadly drugs are sold on social media: Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram, X, and other platforms are an emerging market for drug exchanges. Emojis are commonly used to make purchases.
- Treat mental health disorders: More than 40 percent of adolescents that die of a drug overdose had a mental health condition.

Authors: Holly Geyer, M.D., FASAM, is a hospital internal medicine and addiction medicine specialist; associate professor of medicine; physician lead, Mayo Clinic Opioid Stewardship Program in Arizona; and medical director, Mayo Clinic Occupational Health Services in Arizona. Mike Kurtenbach is director of school safety with the Arizona Department of Education.