

Prescription Opioids, Fentanyl, and Heroin: Information for Educators and Youth

Prescription Opioids

What Are Prescription Opioids?

Prescription opioids are drugs that are used to treat pain and discomfort. They are often referred to as prescription “pain medicine,” “pain killers,” or “pain meds.” They are regulated medications that are usually manufactured in an **approved lab**. They should only be used when prescribed by a doctor. The most common prescription opioids are in pill form, and include names like oxycodone (OxyContin®, Percocet®), hydrocodone (Vicodin®), oxymorphone (Opana®), morphine (Kadian®, Avinza®), codeine and fentanyl.



How Do Prescription Opioids Make People “High”?

Prescription pain medicine go directly to the brain to **interrupt the body’s messages about pain, thus reducing the perception of pain**. Painful sensations are replaced with other feelings or what is sometimes called a “high.” When someone keeps taking the drug over a long period of time, the body **needs more and more of it** to feel the effects.

Why Might Teens Use Prescription Opioids?

Sometimes doctors prescribe these medicines for teens to help them with physical pain. Athletes may be prescribed them to help with the pain of a sports injury. Teens may also be prescribed them for the **pain of migraines or menstrual cramps**. While **most people do not use** prescription painkillers, some teens may be curious to use them.

Why Is It Dangerous to Use Prescription Drugs Not Prescribed to You?

The most important reason for not using prescription drugs that aren’t prescribed for you is that the drugs can be **deadly**. An overdose of opioids can **cut off your breathing** and result in **brain damage and death, even with only one dose**. And, unfortunately, these drugs are easy to overdose.

Prescription pain medicine come in many forms and strengths, and the correct dosage that a doctor prescribes is different for every person. The only painkillers you should ever take should be prescribed by your doctor, purchased from a pharmacy, and taken according to your doctor's instructions while you are under their care.

Sometimes, these drugs are made in illegal labs. Painkillers that are purchased on the internet, on the street, or from someone you know are considered **illegal**. They are very dangerous because it is not known what is actually in them. Many teens do not know what is actually in them, what the drugs are for, or which pills are more powerful than others. They also don't know what dosages are dangerous and how these drugs react when combined with other drugs, such as alcohol, marijuana, or stimulants. **Combining drugs is extremely dangerous** and can affect doing simple tasks, or can cause death from stroke, heart attack, or respiratory failure (**inability to breathe**).

Are There Other Effects Besides Pain Relief or a "High"?

Yes. Prescription opioids **slow down your breathing**, which can send too little oxygen to your brain making you tired or **confused**, and they can cause constipation and **nausea**.

Are Prescription Opioids Addictive?

Yes. Using prescription opioids can lead to developing a dependence on the drug and **addiction very quickly**. The more often someone uses these drugs, the larger the dose they need the next time to get the same effect. Because of this, doctors are very careful when prescribing these drugs and only prescribe a dose that will work **for a specific patient and for a short period of time**. If these drugs are used in a way that is different from these instructions, it is considered illegal.

Continued use of these drugs produces both mental and physical cravings, dependency, and addiction. Mental symptoms of taking the drug away include depression and anxiety. Physical symptoms of withdrawal from an addiction include stomach cramps, aches, sweating, chills, nausea, shaking, and trouble sleeping.

Fentanyl

What Is Fentanyl?

Fentanyl is a potent synthetic opioid that is up to 100 times stronger than morphine (a prescription opioid) and 50 times stronger than heroin (an illegal opioid). Fentanyl has contributed to an increase in drug overdose deaths in the United States. Even a very small amount of fentanyl can be deadly.

Why Might Someone Use Fentanyl?

Pharmaceutical fentanyl might be prescribed by a doctor to treat someone for complex pain conditions, such as advanced cancer. However, illicitly manufactured fentanyl is illegally distributed because it is chemically similar to other opioids and can produce a high. Fentanyl is often mixed with other drugs because of its extreme potency, making drugs cheaper, more powerful, more addictive, and more dangerous. Someone might not even know there is fentanyl in a drug.

Heroin

What Is Heroin?

Heroin is an opioid drug processed from morphine. Heroin is a very addictive. It is an **illegal** drug usually sold as a white or brownish powder. **Most people do not use** heroin, but sometimes when a person is addicted to opioids, they may start using heroin for its effects. It is **illegal to purchase or use** heroin whether you are a teen or an adult.

How Does Heroin Affect the Body?

Like other opioids, heroin affects the brain and **briefly prevents the brain from perceiving pain**. There can be a brief "high" of pleasant feelings, followed by feeling very sleepy and then feeling wide awake. When someone keeps using opioids, they **need more and more of it** to feel the same effects and to function normally; this is addiction. Any person who uses opioids can become addicted, and sometime become addicted very quickly.

Safety

What are the Overdose Risks of Prescription Opioids, Fentanyl, or Heroin?

Synthetic opioids are the most common drugs involved in overdose deaths. Prescription opioids should only be taken as prescribed by a doctor, never shared with someone else, and never mixed with other drugs. **Using an illegal opioid just one time is dangerous enough to cause an overdose and death** because they are often **mixed with other substances** and there is no proof **of what is actually in them, or the strength (or potency)**. Opioid overdose can occur from misusing any type of opioid, and it is life-threatening and requires immediate emergency care. Opioid overdose causes breathing and heartbeat to slow or stop completely.

What Can Be Done for an Opioid Overdose?

A person experiencing an opioid overdose needs emergency care immediately to prevent death. **Call 911 immediately**; follow their instructions and possibly begin CPR if the person has stopped breathing. If available, treat the person with naloxone. **Naloxone can be a life-saving medication that can reverse an overdose from opioids if given correctly and in time** to prevent death. Naloxone is an opioid receptor antagonist that binds to the brain to temporarily block the effects of other opioids.

