

COVID-19: Opioid Use

The COVID-19 pandemic presents unique challenges for people who use opioids (ex. prescription painkillers, heroin, and fentanyl). Physical distancing guidelines may put this population at higher risk for complications or overdose. Below are some tips for keeping safe while using opioids and practicing physical distancing.

People with Opioid-Use Disorder at High-Risk for COVID-19

People who use opioids at high doses medically or who have opioid-use disorder (OUD) face separate challenges to their respiratory health than other people who do not use opioids. Since opioids act in the brainstem to slow breathing, their use not only puts the user at risk of life-threatening or fatal overdose, it may also cause a harmful decrease in oxygen in the blood (hypoxemia). Lack of oxygen can be especially damaging to the brain; while brain cells can withstand short periods of low oxygen, they can suffer damage when this state persists. Chronic respiratory disease is already known to increase overdose mortality risk among people taking opioids, and thus diminished lung capacity from COVID-19 could put this population at risk.

Harm reduction

- **Use one drug at a time or less of each drug.** Most fatal overdoses result from poly-drug use. Drugs taken together can interact in ways that increase overall effects.
- **Avoid mixing opioids with other drugs that impact breathing.** Alcohol, sleeping pills, and benzodiazepines all have an impact on breathing. Mixing these drugs with opioids increases risk for overdose.
- **Do not share paraphernalia.** Paraphernalia may include e-cigarettes, cigarettes, pipes, bongs, etc. Sharing paraphernalia with others can increase risk of transmitting COVID-19.
- **Do not use alone.** If your friend is also using drugs, take turns using. Use at least 30 minutes apart so that someone is alert enough to give naloxone and call 911.

Opioid Overdose and Naloxone

An opioid drug overdose occurs when too much of an opioid overwhelms the brain and breathing is slowed or stopped. The signs of an opioid overdose are shallow breathing, choking or gurling, unresponsiveness, pinpoint pupils, cold and clammy skin, and blue/grey lips, hands, and fingertips.

The best option is to avoid using substances. If this is not an option and opioids will be used, it is crucial to have naloxone, or Narcan, easily accessible. Naloxone is a medication designed to rapidly reverse an opioid overdose. Naloxone nasal spray requires no assembly and is sprayed into one nostril while the person who has overdosed lies on their back. Naloxone is only effective on persons experiencing an opioid overdose. It is a very safe medication that will not have an effect on someone not experiencing an opioid overdose.

Naloxone is available at most pharmacies without a prescription. Naloxone may be available at little or no cost. Visit noM0Deaths.org to find places that offer naloxone to the public for free or visit naloxoneforall.org to request naloxone by mailed to you. Additional information can be found at rx.missouri.edu/opioid.html

1. <https://www.drugabuse.gov/about-nida/noras-blog/2020/03/covid-19-potential-implications-individuals-substance-use-disorders>
2. <https://harmreduction.org/issues/overdose-prevention/overview/overdose-basics/opioid-od-risks-prevention/mixing-drugs/>
3. <https://www.samhsa.gov/medication-assisted-treatment/treatment/opioid-overdose>

Resources

General COVID-19

- Centers for Disease Control: cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov
- NASPA, Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education: naspa.org/project/covid-19-resources
- National Institutes of Health: nih.gov/health-information/coronavirus#!/detail/403327
- Missouri Department of Mental Health: dmh.mo.gov/disaster-services/covid-19-information
- Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services: health.mo.gov/living/healthcondiseases/communicable/novel-coronavirus
- World Health Organization: who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/events-as-they-happen

Substance Use

- National Institute on Drug Abuse - COVID-19: Potential Implications for Individuals with Substance Use Disorders: drugabuse.gov/about-nida/noras-blog/2020/03/covid-19-potential-implications-individuals-substance-use-disorders
- SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) Treatment Locator: samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline
- Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA): COVID-19 Information Page: deادiversion.usdoj.gov/coronavirus.html
- SAMHSA's Opioid Treatment Program Guidance for Quarantined Patients: facebook.com/MoSafeRx

Naloxone

- CDC - Reverse Overdose to Prevent Death: cdc.gov/drugoverdose/prevention/reverse-od.html
- Harm Reduction Coalition - Understanding Naloxone: harmreduction.org/issues/overdose-prevention/overview/overdose-basics/understanding-naloxone/
- How to Use Naloxone to Reverse Opioid Overdose: drugfree.org/article/overdose-response-treatment/
- National Institute on Drug Abuse - Naloxone: drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/naloxone
- US Surgeon General's Advisory on Naloxone and Opioid Overdose: hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/priorities/opioids-and-addiction/naloxone-advisory/index.html

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