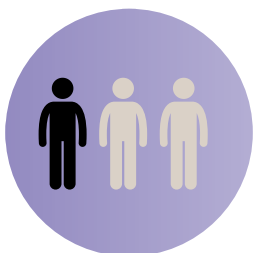


Substances At A Glance: Opioids

Approximately 1 in 10 people who use opioids report problematic or addictive use.¹



What are opioids? Opioids are a class of pharmaceutical drugs designed to relieve pain. However, they can also produce feelings of euphoria, which may cause people to use them improperly. Opioids are also available illegally and can be consumed as pills, injected through needles or intravenous, crushed up and inhaled or absorbed through the skin with a transdermal patch. When opioids are used incorrectly, they pose a risk for addiction and other serious effects.



Opioid use among youth: In Canada, 7.4% of youth in grades 7-12 report using pharmaceuticals including opioids to get high in the past 12 months, while 1.8% report mixing opioids with other drugs or medications.² 35.6% of post-secondary age students report past-year use of pharmaceuticals like opioids to get high, and 5.7% of post-secondary students report mixing prescription opioids (morphine, codeine) and illegal opioids (heroin and fentanyl) with cannabis.³



Why do people use opioids? In 2018, 1 in 8 people in Canada age 15 or older were medically prescribed opioids.¹ Non-medical reasons that young people cite for using opioids include to experience the feeling of being high, as well as to self-medicate to escape painful feelings, emotions or problems in their life.



What are the effects of opioid use? When medically prescribed, opioids can provide short-term pain relief and can evoke feelings of euphoria, relaxation, pleasure and excitement. Opioid use can also cause drowsiness, constipation, vomiting, headaches, dizziness and confusion. Opioid effects are extremely potent; improperly using prescription opioids or using illegal opioids can cause difficulty in breathing that can lead to fatal respiratory arrest.



Opioids and the law: Opioids are legally available with a medical prescription to manage pain after surgeries or chronic pain. Using opioids for any non-medical purpose is considered problematic use. Illegal opioids like heroin and non-regulated fentanyl are considered Schedule I substances under the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act.⁴ In Canada, producing, possessing, selling or giving these substances to others can result in criminal charges, fines and prison time.



Get more information about opioids on [our website](#).



Substances At A Glance: Opioids

The opioid crisis in Canada has killed over 30,000 people between 2016-2022, or 21 people per day. Overall, 96% of fatal overdoses are accidental.⁵



What are the risks of problematic opioid use? Opioids can cause sexual impotence in men and irregular menstrual cycles in women. Non-medical use while pregnant can also cause miscarriage, premature birth and infant mortality. Consuming even a few grams of fentanyl or heroin can be fatal, causing a person to stop breathing.⁴ Even 2 milligrams of pure fentanyl is enough to kill the average adult.



How can someone reduce the risks of opioid use? Avoid illegal opioids. Opioids should only be taken by the person with the prescription as directed by a healthcare provider. Keep opioids in a secure space, return any unused opioids to a local pharmacy and do not share them with other people. Do not mix opioids with any other drugs or alcohol as this can increase the risk of harm or death. No one should use opioids alone - there are supervised consumption or overdose prevention sites available in cities across Canada.



What is Naloxone? Naloxone is a fast-acting drug available as a nasal spray or an injectable needle. It temporarily reverses the effects of an opioid overdose. It is safe for all ages and non-addictive. However, Naloxone's effects only last 20-90 minutes, while an opioid can remain in the body for a longer period of time. If a person overdoses on opioids, they need medical attention even if they have taken Naloxone, as any improvements they show may only be temporary. Take-home naloxone kits are available for free at pharmacies in some provinces.⁶



How can I help my kids understand the risks of opioids? Have a discussion with your kids about the opioid crisis and ensure they understand the serious health risks of consuming any pills or powder they get off the street or online. If your child already uses opioids non-medically, it's important they know how to reduce their risk of an accidental overdose. Make a safety plan together, confirm they know the signs of overdose and how to administer Naloxone. Ensure they know that you will support them whenever they are ready to reach out for help.



The Good Samaritan Overdose Act: Someone who uses opioids may not call emergency medical services in the event of an overdose for fear they could get into legal trouble. The Good Samaritan Drug Overdose Act offers some legal protection to anyone seeking emergency support during an overdose, including the person experiencing the overdose and anyone else on the scene. The Act can protect from charges of possession of a controlled substance.⁷

Reference List

1. Statistics Canada, 2022. [Significant factors associated with problematic use of opioid pain relief medications among the household population, Canada, 2018.](#)
2. Health Canada, 2023. [Canadian Student Tobacco, Alcohol, and Drugs Survey 2021-2022.](#)
3. Health Canada, 2021. [Canadian Post-Secondary Alcohol and Drugs Survey 2019-2020.](#)
4. Health Canada, 2023. [Fentanyl.](#)
5. Health Canada, 2023. [Health Info-Base: Opioid- and Stimulant-Related Harms in Canada \(June 2023\).](#)
6. Health Canada, 2023. [Naloxone.](#)
7. Government of Canada, 2021. [About the Good Samaritan Overdose Act.](#)