

Opioid Basics

Opioids are a class of drugs used to reduce pain. There are three basic categories:

Prescription opioids:

These can be prescribed by doctors to treat moderate to severe pain, but can also have serious risks and side effects.

Common types are oxycodone (OxyContin), hydrocodone (Vicodin), morphine and methadone.

Fentanyl and Fentanyl derivatives:

A synthetic opioid pain reliever. It is many times more powerful than other opioids and is approved for treating severe pain, typically advanced cancer pain.

Illegally made fentanyl has been on the rise in several states

Heroin:

This is an illegal opioid. Heroin use has increased across the U.S. among men and women, most age groups, and all income levels.



FACT: Opioids are psychoactive substances derived from the opium poppy, or their synthetic analogues.



FACT: Since 1999, the amount of prescription opioids sold in the U.S. nearly quadrupled, yet there has not been an overall change in the amount of pain that Americans report. Deaths from prescription opioids—drugs like oxycodone, hydrocodone, and methadone—have more than quadrupled since 1999.



FACT: Due to their effect on the part of the brain which regulates breathing, opioids in high doses can cause respiratory depression and death. An opioid overdose can be identified by a combination of three signs and symptoms referred to as the “opioid overdose triad”. The symptoms of the triad are:

- Pinpoint pupils
- Unconsciousness
- Respiratory depression



FACT: As matter of reference it has been determined that it would only take 2-3 milligrams of fentanyl to induce respiratory depression or respiratory arrest and possibly death. When visually compared, 2-3 milligrams of fentanyl is about the same as 5-7 individual grains of table salt.

First responders should always employ universal safety precautions and use, at a minimum, PPE when they arrive at a scene where there has been a suspected overdose incident.

Individual PPE Kits should contain at a minimum:

- **Nitrile gloves**
- **N-95 dust masks**
- **Sturdy eye protection**
- **Paper coveralls/shoe covers**
- **Naloxone injector(s)**

To limit the potential for exposure, personnel should refrain from eating, drinking, or smoking while in the presence of any suspected fentanyl-related substance.

Do NOT use hand sanitizer. Hand sanitizers may contain alcohol, a skin penetrant, which may increase the absorption of fentanyl through the skin.

People at higher risk of opioid overdose

- People with opioid dependence, in particular following reduced tolerance (following detoxification, release from incarceration, cessation of treatment);
- People who inject opioids;
- People who use prescription opioids, in particular those taking higher doses;
- People who use opioids in combination with other sedating substances;
- People who use opioids and have medical conditions such as HIV, liver or lung disease or suffer from depression;
- Household members of people in possession of opioids (including prescription opioids.)

Resources Used:

1. Center for Disease Control (CDC), “Opioid Basics”, <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/opioids/index.html>, June 5, 2017
2. World Health Organization (WHO), “Information Sheet for Opioid Overdose”, http://www.who.int/substance_abuse/information-sheet/en/, June 5, 2017
3. U.S Department of Justice, Drug Enforcement Administration, “Fentanyl, A Briefing Guide for First Responders” ; 2017