

Opioids 101

What Faith-based Organizations Should Know About Opioids and Naloxone

September 21, 2023

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What are Opioids?

Opioids are a class of prescription medication commonly prescribed to treat moderate to severe pain. Taking opioids in excess can cause breathing and heart rate to slow and eventually cease entirely. The cause of death most frequently cited in opioid overdose is lack of oxygen.

- **Prescription opioids** (e.g., oxycodone (OxyContin), hydrocodone (Vicodin), morphine, fentanyl and methadone) can be prescribed by doctors to treat moderate to severe pain but can also have serious risks and side effects if not taken as prescribed.
- **Heroin** is an illegal opioid. Thirty-six (36) people die every day from an overdose death involving heroin in the United States.
- **Fentanyl** is a synthetic opioid pain reliever that is many times more powerful than other opioids. **Illicit fentanyl** is typically mixed into other illegal drugs. Fentanyl-laced drugs are extremely dangerous, and many people may be unaware that their drugs are laced with fentanyl. Illegally made and distributed fentanyl has been on the rise across the country.

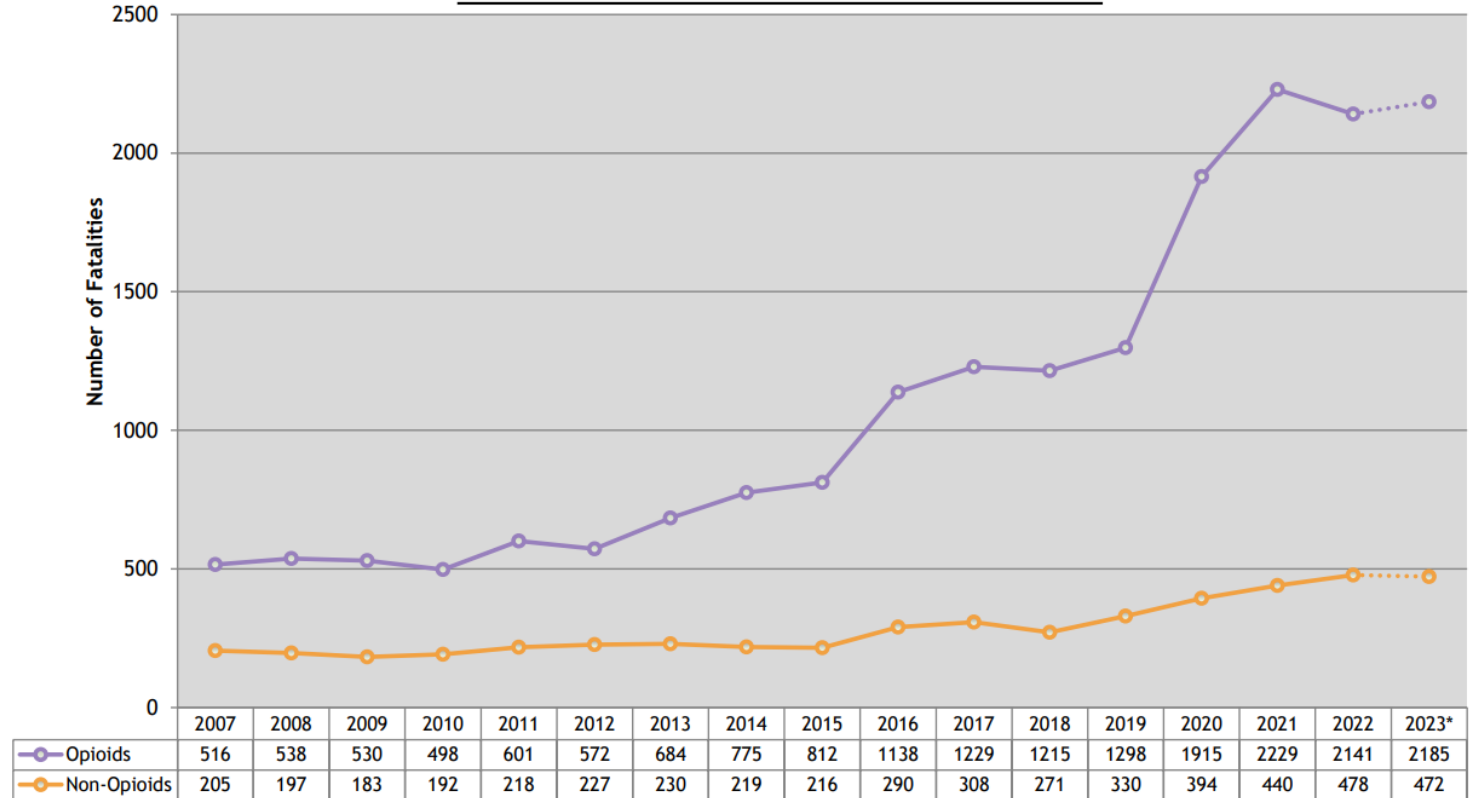
The Opioid Epidemic

- The rise of opioid-related deaths began increasing in the 1990s with increased opioid prescribing practices, beginning the opioid epidemic.
- Since then, the opioid epidemic has impacted every state; the CDC reports that there were nearly **83,000 fatal opioid overdoses in 2022**.
- In 2021, the opioid-related overdose death count was 2,223 Virginia residents and the opioid-related overdose death rate was 25.9 per 100,000 residents
- Opioids can be legally prescribed or illicitly obtained.
- In Virginia, the epidemic is largely driven by **illegally made fentanyl**, a highly potent synthetic opioid. Most recent cases of fentanyl-related overdose are linked to illegally made fentanyl, which is distributed through illegal drug markets for its heroin-like effect. It is commonly mixed with drugs like heroin, cocaine, and methamphetamine and made into pills that are made to resemble other prescription opioids.

Fatal opioid overdoses have increased dramatically and represented over 80% of all fatal drug overdoses in Virginia in 2022.

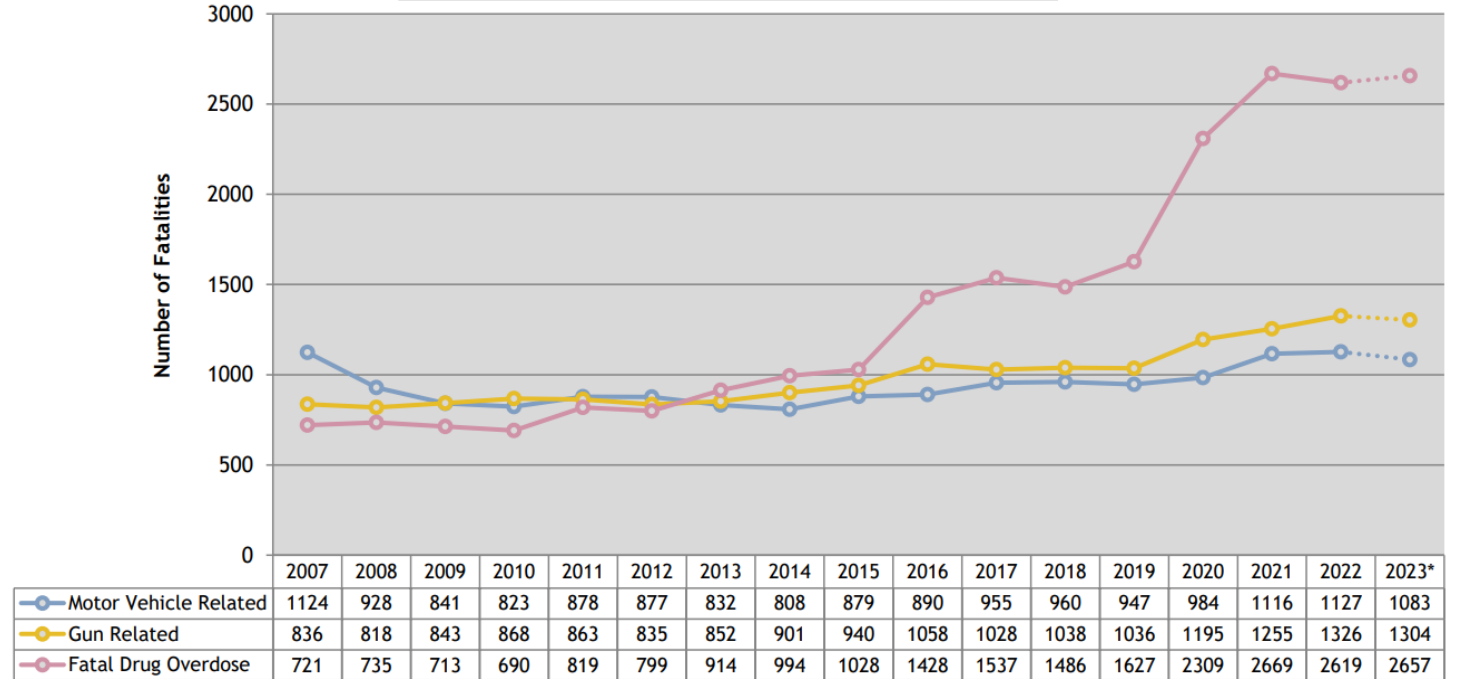
"Fatal Drug Overdose Quarterly Report: First Quarter 2023. Office of the Chief Medical Examiner. Edition 2023.1. July 2023."

Total Number of Fatal Opioid Overdoses vs. Non-Opioid Overdoses by Year of Death, 2007-2023*
Data for 2023 is a Predicted Total for the Entire Year



Fatal drug overdoses represent the leading cause of unnatural death in Virginia.

Total Number of Motor Vehicle, Gun, and Drug Related Fatalities by Year of Death, 2007-2023*
Data for 2023 is a Predicted Total for the Entire Year



"Fatal Drug Overdose Quarterly Report: First Quarter 2023. Office of the Chief Medical Examiner. Edition 2023.1. July 2023.

What is naloxone?

- Naloxone is an **opioid reversal agent**, approved by the FDA since 1971.
- When used appropriately, it can reverse an opioid overdose, allowing a person to resume breathing and **potentially saving their life**. Naloxone is intended to be administered right away and does not take the place of emergency medical care.
- There are several forms of naloxone, including naloxone that is injected into the muscle and naloxone that is administered in the form of a nasal spray.
- Nasal naloxone includes the brand name Narcan and a generic formulation.
- NARCAN® 4mg naloxone hydrochloride nasal spray is now available to the public as an OTC medication with additional brands in the process of OTC approval with the FDA.

Naloxone Access in Virginia

- VDH maintains a [Statewide Naloxone Standing Order](#), allowing anyone to receive naloxone from a retail pharmacy without an individual prescription. Individuals can access via their insurance, if applicable, though cost is subject to the individual's insurance coverage.
- VDH also distributes naloxone to various community partners, including Comprehensive Harm Reduction Sites, Community Services Boards, First Responders, VDH local health districts, Department of Corrections, and public schools at no cost to them.
- Naloxone is also now available as an over-the-counter (OTC) product in the form of a 4mg naloxone nasal spray NARCAN®. OTC naloxone will be hitting the shelves in stores as early as the end of this month.
- Naloxone distribution from VDH focuses on high-risk and high-priority populations, including:
 - People who use drugs
 - Friends, family, and caregivers of people who use drugs
 - People who work with people who use drugs
 - High-priority locations within communities, e.g. recovery and treatment facilities

Can FBOs Access Naloxone?

- Due to limited resources, no-cost naloxone may be available to faith-based organizations from VDH if the organization:
 - Directly serves with people who use drugs
 - Directly serves family members and/or friends of people who use drugs
 - Provides direct support to unhoused individuals
- VDH is unable to provide no-cost naloxone for the following purposes:
 - Faith based events for the general public
 - Stocking first aid kits
 - Having it on hand as "just in case"
- FBOs can encourage individuals to obtain naloxone on their own through a pharmacy, or purchase the OTC product

How Else Can I Help?

- **Trust is key:** Faith leaders foster trust and support in faith communities. By taking a knowledgeable stand on the issue of opioid use, faith communities and leaders can play an important role in increasing awareness of opioids and access to naloxone, and connecting people to the help they need.
- **Reduce the stigma:** Have open conversations about opioids with your community
- **Lead by example:** Consider securing naloxone via prescription or over-the-counter and talking openly about it within your community

Frequently Asked Questions

- **Where can I get naloxone?**

- OTC Narcan®, a name brand naloxone nasal spray product, is now available for purchase online and in stores! You can purchase naloxone at local retailers and pharmacies without a prescription. Narcan® nasal spray can be purchased in a 2-pack for \$44.99. Find a store near you using the Narcan locator tool: [Where to Buy NARCAN® \(naloxone HCl\) Nasal Spray](#)
- You may also be able to get naloxone at a local pharmacy. Naloxone is available as a prescription product under the State Health Commissioner's standing order, which serves as a prescription written for the general public, rather than specifically for an individual. It is up to each individual pharmacy to decide whether to dispense naloxone under the statewide standing order. Please contact your pharmacy before visiting.
- Your doctor or healthcare provider may also be able to write a prescription for naloxone.
- Additionally, many local health districts and community services boards dispense naloxone at REVIVE! training events, during walk-in clinic hours, and at other community events.

- **Is naloxone free?**

- No. OTC Narcan® nasal spray can be purchased in a 2-pack for \$44.99.
- The out-of-pocket cost for prescription product ranges from \$70 to \$150 for a two-dose kit. Some insurance plans may pay some portion of the cost, but coverage varies widely.
- Check with your local health district or community services board to determine if you can get naloxone at no cost

Frequently Asked Questions

- **Is there a difference between OTC and prescription naloxone medication?**
 - Naloxone is available in multiple forms, including injectable and nasal spray. Different brands may have different formulations or doses of naloxone, but they are all effective at reversing the effects of opioid overdose.
 - OTC Narcan® 4mg nasal spray is the same prescription strength product as prescription naloxone.
- **Where can I learn how to administer naloxone to someone suspected of an overdose?**
 - One of the best ways for the public to learn about the use of naloxone is through the REVIVE! training course. Learn more on the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services [REVIVE! webpage](#).