

# Overdose Intervention

## What is Drug Overdose?

Drug overdoses are usually life threatening and preventable.

Most overdoses occur with the abuse of various drugs such as heroin, morphine and sleeping pills (barbiturates).

The risk of overdose is especially great when the individual is using illicit drugs without knowledge of the drug's content or strength.

### -- Overdose Warning Signs or Symptoms --

**Someone who has overdosed:**

- May experience nausea or vomiting.
- May appear to be sleeping.
- May fail to respond if you call their name or shake them.
- May make snoring or "gurgling" sounds.
- May have lips or fingernails turn blue.

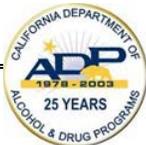
**IF YOU SUSPECT SOMEONE HAS OVERDOSED CALL 911 RIGHT AWAY!!**

## Who is at Risk for Overdose?

Anyone who uses legal and illegal drugs could be at risk of overdose, but young people, seniors and intravenous (IV) drug users are at greater risk of overdose.

**A person may be at higher risk of overdosing if he or she:**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses multiple drugs.</li> <li>• Is beginning methamphetamine treatment.</li> <li>• Is mixing drugs: such as heroin and tranquilizers/prescription drugs and/or alcohol.</li> <li>• Is a drug user coming out of prison and thus exhibiting reduced tolerance.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses heroin.</li> <li>• Suffered a previous overdose.</li> <li>• Is withdrawing from drugs (which often leads to reduced tolerance).</li> <li>• Is suffering from depression, high risk-taking, and suicidal tendencies.</li> </ul>
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An overdose can happen when:

- Someone is injecting alone (2/3 of all overdoses occur in the home and when the person is alone);
- The person injects quickly or hurriedly;
- The person has been using drugs for a long time and thinks he/she knows what he/she is doing;
- The person using the drug is suicidal; or
- The user loses his/her tolerance.

When  
Can  
Overdoses  
Happen?

## OVERDOSE PREVENTION STRATEGIES

The Medical Director for the California Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs (ADP) suggests education and outreach can effectively reduce the number of overdoses.

If you use drugs, or have friends or family members who do, you should be aware of the overdose risk factors associated with Tolerance, Multiple Drug Use, Methods for Taking Drugs, and Drug Purity.

### Tolerance

People who relapse need to know they are at great risk of overdosing. Drug tolerance can be lower if someone has stopped using. The person mistakenly believes that he or she needs to use the same amount of the drug they were using before. Lower tolerance may cause a potentially fatal overdose.

**Multiple Drug Use:** People who use multiple drugs (or “polydrug abusers”) need to be aware that they are risking overdose when they mix different drugs, including alcohol.

### Multiple Drug Use

Commonly mixed drugs include sleeping pills, alcohol, Valium and heroin. Using pills and heroin within 12 hours of each other is the single largest cause of fatal overdose.

### Prescription Medications

People who take prescription medications and use illicit drugs are at increased risk of overdose.

The ADP Medical Director further recommends physicians treating older and HIV-positive patients be aware of known drug interactions and be alert for unknown ones:

- As patients age they need less of the medications that stabilize their mood.
- Patients may forget having taken prescribed medications and take more.
- A physician treating HIV-positive patients should be familiar with the interactions and antiviral treatments.
- Physicians should be ready to intervene when seeing signs of alcohol and drug abuse.

### Transmission and Drug Purity Risks

The more rapidly the drug reaches the brain and the more pure it is, the more likely the individual is to overdose.

It is important to know that injecting or inhaling drugs delivers the drug to the brain more rapidly. This increases the risk of overdose.

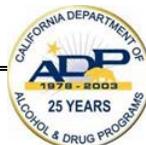
Heroin is more potent now than in the past. The increased potency (up to 80% today) can result in overdoses and overdose deaths. If you don't know what is in a drug, or how strong it might be, don't take it.

## INFORMATION FOR SUBSTANCE ABUSE TREATMENT PROVIDERS

The following information has been provided by the ADP Medical Director for substance abuse treatment and recovery providers, counselors and the clients they serve:

- No one tests the purity of street drugs; therefore, users are at risk because the content and potency of the substances they use varies greatly.
- Street heroin overdoses increase exponentially when purer heroin becomes unexpectedly available.
- Mixing downers and alcohol can be fatal.
- If you think you or a friend may have overdosed, call 911 immediately.

The ADP Medical Director strongly recommends counselors remind clients entering abstinence and sobriety that if they relapse, using at their old levels can be fatal.



## FURTHER INFORMATION AND IDEAS ON OVERDOSE PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

According to the ADP Medical Director, the following strategies of dealing with an overdose have proven promising.

### Overdose Response

- Teach people to recognize that an overdose has occurred.

Recognizing when overdose occurs is critical in appropriate treatment and emergency management. Many people are unaware of the significance of snoring and noisy breathing in those who are asleep.

- Messages must stress the need to call for medical attention for suspected overdoses. Calling for emergency help should be the FIRST, not LAST response.

### Overdose Intervention

- Drug users should be encouraged to seek treatment and make contact with a treatment provider or other health and human services agency that can offer support and advice.

Agencies such as general practitioners and community pharmacies should be encouraged to offer information and referral sources.

- People who experience dependence on heroin should be encouraged to seek professional help where they can be assessed for, and referred to, appropriate treatment.
- Education about the causes and mechanisms of overdose is vital.

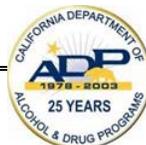
All drug users should be taught about the risks of mixing drugs, and that it is a primary cause of overdose.

- Drug users should know the length of time that should elapse between using different drugs, as well as the approximate period it takes to establish and lose tolerance and the fact that the majority of overdoses are not instantaneous but occur gradually over some hours.

### Overdose Education Strategies

- Educational materials can range from the basic “one-liner” (e.g., “Using pills and heroin within 12 hours of each other is the single largest cause of fatal overdose”) to more detailed information presented in leaflets or booklets. This material should address symptoms of overdose, what to tell the 911 and ambulance operators, and overdose specific resuscitation in detailed steps.

Educational materials should be prepared to address the issue of the body’s tolerance to drugs. These should be widely available anywhere that drug users are concentrated and (however temporarily) restrained from drug use.



- Polydrug pharmacology is poorly understood.

It is important that people be made aware that they CAN prevent overdoses by not mixing drugs. All education/prevention materials that make any mention of the reasons heroin is dangerous must also mention the dangers of polydrug use.

#### Additional Resources and Information

1. Davidson, Peter and Lokley, Wendy, *Forgetting to Breathe: Opioid Overdose and Young In Perth*, Available online at <http://www.dao.health.wa.gov.au/wadaso/html/contents/publications/studies/overdoses/forgetting-to-breathe.pdf>
2. *Overdose Advice and Steps*, Available online at <http://www.drugnet.info/intervention/overdose.htm>
3. Smith, David E. and Seymour Richard B., *Clinician's Guide to Substance Abuse*, New York: McGraw-Hill Professional, 2001.