

Opioids:

Communities Finding Solutions



Table of Contents

“What Can I Do?”	3
Reduce the Stigma	4
Forms of Opioid Drugs	5-7
Avenues to Opioid Addiction.....	8
Signs of Opioid Addiction	9
What to Do If You Suspect Someone Is Addicted.....	10
What to Do During an Opioid Overdose.....	11
How to Stay Safe When Taking Prescription Opioids	12
Sources and Learning	13

“What Can I Do?”

Use of illegal substances, primarily opioids, is the leading cause of accidental death in the United States. Opioids pose a danger to people who use these drugs in unintended ways, such as recreational use. They are highly addictive chemical substances and can lead to a substance use disorder.

The National Institute on Drug Abuse defines addiction as “a chronic, relapsing brain disease that is characterized by compulsive drug seeking and use, despite harmful consequences.” Due to addiction’s chronic nature and the probability of relapse, the prevalence of opioid use is not easy to solve.

This leaves many of us asking, “What can I do?”

In this action guide, you will learn the myths surrounding opioid abuse, how people become addicted to opioids, signs to look for, what to do if you suspect someone is addicted, what to do in the event of an overdose, how to take prescription opioids safely, and what resources are available to learn about opioids and addiction.



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“What can I do?”

Reduce the Stigma

QUESTION #1:

When you hear that someone is addicted to opioids, what do you picture?

- A homeless man lying in an alley?
- A pale person with a needle hanging from their arm?
- A mother of two with a full-time job?

We all have an idea of what opioid addiction looks like; however, as with most psychological disorders, it's not as simple to identify as one might think. The simple fact is this: Any of the individuals listed above could be suffering from opioid addiction. The stereotypes of the first two examples are dangerous, because they can cause people with real substance abuse issues to ignore their own addiction, since they don't feel that they act or look the way addiction has been portrayed to them.

One of the most important steps toward destroying the stigma of opioid addiction is to realize that it can happen to anyone, regardless of factors like race, gender, ethnicity, religion and income level.

QUESTION #2:

When someone is addicted to opioids, what should be blamed?

- The person, for their lack of willpower?
- Pressure from their peers or society?
- Neither, because the person needs medical help?

Unfortunately, too many people believe some combination of the first two answers, when the only factual answer is neither. Opioid addiction is not a moral failing and does not make a person weaker than others. And parents are no more at fault than they would be if their child had asthma or an autoimmune disease. Since addiction in all its forms (whether to opioids, alcohol or other drugs) is a disease, anyone suffering from it should seek medical attention, the same way they would if they had a chronic condition like diabetes or post-traumatic stress disorder.



Forms of Opioid Drugs

Another myth surrounding opioids is that they're an illegal street drug. In reality, most opioid overdoses are from prescription opiates in pill form, such as Percocet or Vicodin. While heroin is also an opiate, there is no form of heroin used for legitimate medicinal purposes. From 2002-2015, the number of deaths involving prescription opioids far exceeded the number of deaths that involved heroin.

So let's get a better look at the variety of opioids in their illegal, synthetic and prescription forms.



ILLEGAL

Characteristics: "street" drug, harder to access

- **Heroin** – white or brownish powder, or dark brown/black powder called "black tar heroin"





Forms of Opioid Drugs (continued)



SYNTHETIC OPIOIDS

Characteristics: can be cut with heroin, hard to access

- **Fentanyl** – lollipops, transdermal patches, tablets, lozenges, nasal sprays
- **Carfentanil** – powder, blotter paper, tablets, and spray
- **U-47700** – white or light pink powder
- **Acetyl-fentanyl** – powder, tablet, blotter paper
- **AH-7921** – powder



Courtesy: Associated Press

Forms of Opioid Drugs (continued)



PRESCRIPTION

Characteristics: prescribed for pain, easier to access

- **Morphine** – injection, light blue liquid, pills (white, purple or red), patches, tablets, suppositories
- **Methadone** – liquid (green or blue), injection, tablets
- **Buprenorphine** – orange or white pills
- **Hydrocodone** (Vicodin) – white tablets
- **Oxycodone**
 - OxyContin – pills (all colors)
 - Percocet (when combined with Acetaminophen) – yellow, white or blue pills
- **Codeine** – white tablets, purple syrup
- **Hydromorphone** – tablets (green, orange, yellow or white), injection, suppositories
- **Oxymorphone** – tablets (all colors), injection
- **Meperidine** – white tablets, syrup, injection



Courtesy: CNN.com



Courtesy: Phamar.org/Sprinks

Avenues to Opioid Addiction



MARISSA'S STORY. [BREAKING THE CYCLE.](#)

There are many ways and reasons that people get addicted to opioids. Teenagers and young adults experiment with opioids for varying reasons—from boredom, peer pressure, depression or desire for weight loss.

The method of getting addicted to prescription opioids is a little more complex. Because opioids can be prescribed for pain relief after an injury or illness, they create a slippery slope for a person predisposed to addiction. Even after taking the medication as directed, a person can build up an opioid tolerance to the point where they need to take more to achieve the same effect, against the instructions of their physician. This can ultimately lead to a physical dependence on the opioid that causes withdrawal if they discontinue opioid use. Worst of all, the whole process can happen faster than the person can realize what's happening.

When the prescription runs out, some people resort to obtaining the same form of opioid elsewhere. It's also common for these people to obtain heroin, a far cheaper option, to fulfill their cravings. In fact, four out of five people that abuse prescription opioids go to heroin when they can't get pills.

But every person is different. [Watch Marissa's story](#) about her journey into addiction and through to recovery for an example of how opioids can greatly affect a person's life.

Signs of Opioid Addiction

Opioid addiction does not discriminate. It does not fall neatly into any socioeconomic status, gender, race or criminal background. That's why it is so important to look at and evaluate each person's behaviors, demeanor and actions to determine if help is needed.

There are various symptoms that can indicate opioid abuse and addiction, including:

- Abnormal sleep
- Agitation
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Drowsiness
- Irritability
- Lack of motivation
- Mood swings
- Nausea
- Poor coordination
- Poor decision-making
- Shallow or slow breathing
- Slurred speech
- Vomiting

You may also find a hidden stash in tins or jars (pill form) or wrapped in plastic or foil wrap (powder form).

In children, the signs may not be apparent. However, children of parents with substance use disorder are more likely to develop an addiction later in life due to Adverse Childhood Experiences. Therefore, it may be appropriate for [children who experience trauma](#) to undergo a screening or assessment to determine the likelihood of developing an addiction.



What to Do If You Suspect Someone Is Addicted

The best course of action for a loved one suffering from addiction is to seek medical attention. Ask the person's health insurance provider how to access drug and alcohol treatment services.

While it might be tempting to avoid the medical route, combating addiction without addiction treatment and/or medication is incredibly dangerous. According to Yale Medicine, "Opioid use disorder is a medical condition just like depression, diabetes or hypertension, and just like those conditions, it is most effectively treated with a combination of medication and counseling."

In Montgomery County, those with medical assistance insurance or no insurance can contact local Case Management Assessment sites at:

CREATIVE HEALTH SERVICES

484-941-0500

<https://creativehs.org/>

COMMUNITY HEALTH AND DENTAL CARE

800-589-6212

<https://ch-dc.org/>

If this is not the first time a person has abused, it's possible they have relapsed. This does not mean that the person, or any previous treatment they received, has failed. Relapse is unfortunately a normal part of recovery for many suffering from addiction, and indicates a need to renew and adjust treatment.

Some people with addiction decline to enter treatment out of fear of withdrawal symptoms. However, accredited and licensed detoxification centers (often part of a treatment center) medically monitor patients to ensure they are as comfortable as possible when harmful substances like opioids leave the body. They can then safely transition into residential inpatient or outpatient treatment programs.

Increasingly, people are opting for Medication-Assisted Therapy (MAT) to safely relieve withdrawal symptoms and psychological cravings. MAT combines controlled levels of FDA-approved medications with counseling services to help people overcome substance abuse and stay sober.

The most important thing for the addicted person to realize is that **no one is alone in their fight**. Addiction treatment programs almost universally involve group therapy, where patients can interact with peers and build support networks. Research has also shown that involving supportive family and friends in addiction treatment plans can lead to an increased chance at long-term sobriety.

What to Do During an Opioid Overdose

One of the major dangers of opioid use is the risk of overdose. Because opioids relax the body, it can cause the body to forget to breathe, or create heart problems like an irregular heartbeat or a blood pressure drop that leads to heart failure. Left untreated, an opioid overdose can lead to a coma, respiratory failure or death.

Fentanyl and carfentanil are even more dangerous than other opioids. Fentanyl is 50 to 100 times more potent than morphine, while carfentanil (sometimes cut with heroin or fentanyl) is far ahead at 10,000 times stronger than morphine. That means a dose as small as a grain of sand can be fatal or cause overdose if ingested.



IF YOU SUSPECT A PERSON HAS OVERDOSED ON OPIOIDS, CALL 911 IMMEDIATELY.

CHECK THE PERSON FOR:

- UNRESPONSIVENESS
- SMALL PUPILS
- SLOW OR NO BREATHING
- BLUE OR GRAY LIPS AND FINGERNAILS
- PALE, COLD, CLAMMY SKIN
- VOMIT

As instructed by the 911 dispatcher, perform rescue breathing or chest compressions.

If naloxone (commonly referred to as Narcan) is available, give the person a dose. This medication can reverse an opioid overdose and comes in an auto-injector that anyone can use. If the person does not respond within 3 minutes, give them another dose. First responders are also equipped with naloxone if an injector is not available to you.

WARM HANDOFF PROJECT

The Pottstown Hospital emergency room handles overdoses with the Warm Handoff Project. When a person enters the ER because of an overdose, a dedicated Care Manager immediately offers information on addiction treatment facilities and performs necessary assessments to get the person directly into treatment.

How to Stay Safe When Taking Prescription Opioids

If you are concerned about getting addicted to opioids, ask a medical professional for a non-opioid medication or a [pain management alternative](#). However, if you or a loved one has no other course of action but to take prescription opioids, here are some tips to stay safe.

- Ask your doctor these [FDA-recommended questions](#) to give yourself peace of mind.
- Stay in touch with your physician while you take the medication. There should be a plan for how long you take it and when to taper the dosage to avoid withdrawal symptoms.
- Try to avoid other substances like alcohol, benzodiazepines (Xanax, Ativan, Klonopin, Valium) or medicines that cause drowsiness.
- Contact a doctor if you or a loved one miss a dose, contract an illness or are prescribed a new medication.
- Safely dispose of opioids by following FDA guidelines. There is no need to risk someone else taking the medication or to save it “just in case.” The FDA recommends using U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration collection sites, throwing medicine in the trash, or flushing drugs down the toilet (only for [certain drugs](#)).

There are permanent U.S. drug disposal sites in our region at:

POTTSTOWN POLICE DEPARTMENT

100 E. High St.
Pottstown, PA 19464
610-970-6572

NORTH COVENTRY TOWNSHIP POLICE DEPARTMENT

845 S. Hanover St.
Pottstown, PA 19465
610-323-8360

LOWER POTTS GROVE TOWNSHIP POLICE DEPARTMENT

2199 Buchert Rd.
Pottstown, PA 19464
610-326-1508

Sources and Learning

No one needs to fight addiction alone. There are many resources that can help if you or a loved one is impacted by opioid abuse. Educate yourself and spread the word using local resources like:

[Creative Health Services](#)

[Community Health and Dental Care](#)

[Montgomery County Office of Behavioral Health](#)

[County of Berks Office of Mental and Behavioral Health](#)

[Chester County Office of Mental Health](#)

[Montgomery County Overdose Prevention](#)

The expert information in this eBook was provided by:

["Addiction as a Disease," Center on Addiction](#)

["Overdose Death Rates," National Institute on Drug Abuse](#)

["3 Major Myths About Opioid Addiction," Yale Medicine](#)

["Fentanyl," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)

["Carfentanil," U.S. National Library of Medicine](#)

["Opioid safety and how to use naloxone," Montgomery County Health Department](#)



If you have questions about dealing with opioid addiction, contact Creative Health Services at 484-941-0500 or info@creativehs.org.



About The Foundation

The Pottstown Area Health & Wellness Foundation's (PAHWF) mission is to enhance the health and wellness of area residents, providing education, funding and programs that motivate people to adopt healthy lifestyles. Visit www.pottstownfoundation.org for more information about the Foundation. Discover Pottstown area's online community, [Mission Healthy Living](#), an initiative of PAHWF, to learn and share great information on how to lead a healthier life.

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