

SEPTEMBER 21<sup>ST</sup> IS

# NATIONAL OPIOID AWARENESS DAY



## Opioids in America

136 people die in America every day from opioid overdose. Those victims do not die in a vacuum. Everyone they have loved suffering from the gaps left in their lives are victims too. On Opioid Awareness Day, we take a moment to recognize the lives lost to opioid overdose. The goal is to stand in solidarity with those currently struggling with addiction, and support the families and communities changed irrevocably by this ongoing crisis. Across the country, the opioid epidemic continues to take a devastating toll, not just in numbers, but in names, faces, and futures. It affects people from all walks of life: our friends, neighbors, coworkers, and loved ones. Behind every statistic is a real story, and behind every story is a chance for change. Opioid Awareness Day is not only a time for remembrance but also a call to action. It's a call to educate ourselves and others, and to advocate for compassionate and evidence-based solutions. Just as important is reducing the stigma that too often prevents people from seeking help.

## The Types of Opioids

"Opioids", as a category, derives from the natural substances within the opium 'poppy' plant. Also known as opiates or narcotics, the mechanism by which they work is by activating nerve cells in the brain and body called opioid receptors. These receptors block pain signals between your brain and the body. The most common variants are morphine, codeine, oxycodone, and heroin. Often a drug like morphine can be prescribed by medical professionals for post surgery recovery. Hydrocodone is prescribed for chronic pain and as a cough suppressant. In a time before the Food and Drug Administration and the Controlled Substances Act, heroin itself was commonly sold over the counter as a remedy for coughs and pneumonia. The drug you likely hear about most in the daily news cycles these days is fentanyl. In 2023, over 115 million pills containing illegal fentanyl were seized by law enforcement. That same year, fentanyl contributed to over 70,000 drug related deaths. This synthetic opioid is pound for pound fifty times stronger than heroin and one hundred times stronger than morphine. According to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, about two milligrams of fentanyl (a quantity so small it could fit on the tip of a pencil) is considered a potentially lethal dose for many people. Fentanyl is often mixed with other drugs or substances, so a big danger is an individual



The poppy flower.

consuming fentanyl without even realizing it. Illicit drug manufacturers and dealers will lace other drugs with it in order to boost its addictive qualities. Combine this with a low cost to produce via base chemicals, it has become an extremely difficult epidemic to get a handle on. If you know someone who is struggling with substance abuse, you could consider purchasing fentanyl test strips for your home, just in case.

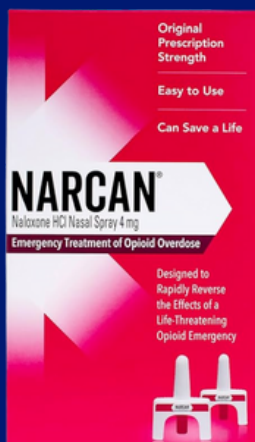
## Signs of an Opioid Overdose

Recognizing the signs of an opioid overdose early can be the difference between life and death. Opioids slow the body's functions, especially breathing. An overdose happens when breathing slows to the point that oxygen can't reach the brain.

Common signs include:

- Slow, shallow, or stopped breathing
- Pale, blue, or cold skin — especially lips or fingernails
- Unresponsiveness or unconsciousness
- Gurgling, choking, or snoring-like sounds
- Pinpoint pupils
- Limp body

**If you suspect and overdose, dial 9-11 immediately. If available, administer NARCAN (Naxalone), available at your local pharmacy.**



## Addiction is a Disease

Substance use disorder, is a complex but treatable disease that affects both the physiological makeup of the brain and an individual's behavior. According to Mayo Clinic, it is not just a matter of willpower or poor choices but a chronic condition that can develop over time, often starting with voluntary drug use and progressing into a compulsive need to use, even when it causes harm. Changes in brain chemistry, especially in the areas that control judgment, decision making, and impulse control, make it extremely difficult for individuals to stop on their own. Genetics, environmental factors, mental health conditions, and early exposure to substances can all increase a person's risk. People with addiction may find themselves needing more of the drug to achieve the same effect, experiencing withdrawal when they try to stop, and prioritizing drug use over responsibilities, relationships, and health. In spite of these facts, 45% of Americans do not view drug abuse as a serious issue. 46% of all federal prisoners are incarcerated on drug related crimes while 59% of all women in federal incarceration are there because of drug related crimes.

# RESOURCES

Veterans are at increased risk for opioid addiction. Among veterans, overdose mortality rates increased by 53% between 2010 and 2019. Many veterans are vulnerable due to the intersections of potential wounds, psychological stress, and social shock. Below are some helpful resources to benefit a veteran in your life who may be struggling.

SAMHSA National Helpline : 24/7, free & confidential. Offers treatment referrals and information for substance use disorders.

☎ 1-800-662-HELP (4357)

National Drug Helpline: Free, confidential, around-the-clock service to help individuals & families learn about treatment options.

☎ 1-(844)-289-0879

Veterans Crisis Line : 24/7, free, and confidential support for veterans, service members, and their families.

☎ 988 then press 1 or Text 838255

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration also offers a free online guide for Patients, Families, and Friends. You can view it by clicking here.

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