

The Other Pandemic – Narcotic Overdose Deaths

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We are experiencing a staggering increase in narcotic overdose deaths in the US potentially for a multitude of reasons including:

1. Increased availability of street drugs contaminated with powerful narcotics from overseas sources,
2. Isolation of young people from friends and social activities due to COVID, leading to drug experimentation,
3. Improper storage of prescription narcotics in homes,
4. Increased acceptance of mind-altering drugs leading to increased experimentation with other drugs.

In 2010 there were 21,088 narcotic overdose deaths in the US. This steadily increased to a relatively stable level of 47,600 deaths in 2017, 46,802 deaths in 2018 and 49,860 deaths in 2019. Then came the COVID pandemic with an associated rise of narcotic overdose deaths to 78,056 in 2020 and 100,306 narcotic overdose deaths in 2021. *A doubling of deaths in the 2 years since the COVID pandemic started!*

We are beginning to see narcotic overdoses at our ski areas to which as patrollers we might be required to respond. Recently, the Mt. Hood Ski Patrol had its first overdose case and then a week later responded to a second case, both which were successfully treated. However, as individuals in the community, it is also possible we may see this problem with our friends, business associates and *even our own families*. It is critical that everyone become acquainted with the signs of drug overdose and the emergency life-saving treatment that needs to be taken BEFORE an ambulance crew arrives. Death can occur from narcotic overdose in as little as 8 minutes – well before an ambulance can arrive at the scene.

So, what should we do if a drug overdose is suspected?

1. Assess the scene. Look for needles or other drug paraphernalia. Be careful not to accidentally contaminate or injure yourself.
2. Evaluate the patient for:
 - a. Unconsciousness or inability to wake up
 - b. Limp body
 - c. Falling asleep, extreme drowsiness
 - d. Slow, shallow or irregular breathing
 - e. Pale, blue, cold and/or clammy skin, lips or fingernails

- f. Choking, snoring or gurgling sounds
- g. Slow or no heart beat
- h. Very small or “pinpoint” pupils

If the situation is unclear, proceed with treatment as if it is an overdose.

3. Call the person’s name.
4. If there is no response, vigorously grind your knuckles into the patient’s sternum or rub your knuckles on the patient’s upper lip.
5. If the patient responds, assess if they can maintain breathing and responsiveness. Try to keep the person awake and alert.
6. If the patient does not respond call 911.
7. If available, administer a dose of naloxone (Narcan). There are several different devices available: 1. Nasal “atomizer” - insert the device nozzle into the patient’s nose and squeezing. DO NOT “TEST” THE DEVICE. 2. Nasal syringe – Insert the device into the nostril and inject ½ into each nostril. 3. Auto-injector – Place on patient’s thigh and press. This can be done through clothing. Read the accompanying instructions to know the correct way to administer the type of device you have available.
8. Even if the person is responding after Naloxone is administered call 911! They will need to be professionally monitored for several hours and the effect from the Naloxone may only last for a short period.
9. Call for additional assistance! Naloxone results in an acute withdrawal from the narcotic which *can* result in the patient becoming extremely agitated and combative with unusual strength. If this occurs, you will need assistance to restrain the patient to prevent injury to themselves and you. Recently it took 4 patrollers to hold down a 16 y/o girl.
10. If the person has not responded to the first dose of Naloxone in 2-3 minutes, administer a second dose.
11. Position the patient on their side in “recovery position.”
12. If the patient stops breathing, begin CPR.
13. Continue to monitor the patient until relieved by the ambulance crew.

It should be noted that Naloxone is extremely safe. If administered to someone who is not overdosed on narcotics, it does not result in any clinical effects. It is better to administer naloxone even if unsure if this is a narcotic overdose. Naloxone is safe to use with pregnant women.

You should **NOT** do the following:

1. Do not slap or forcefully try to stimulate the person – this can lead to additional injury.

2. Do not put the person in a cold shower or bath. This increases the risk of falling, drowning or going into shock.
3. Do not inject the person with any substance (e.g. saltwater, milk, stimulants). The only safe treatment is Naloxone.
4. Do not try to make the person vomit drugs that may have been swallowed. Choking or inhaling vomit into the lungs can cause a fatal result.

Naloxone is widely available without a prescription (can vary by state) at a retail drug store for about \$130.00, however, there are multiple other sources such as state programs and other organizations where Naloxone can be obtained at a lower price or even free. Check what is available in your locality.

Other suggestions that can be taken to help avoid this situation:

1. If you have prescription narcotics at home, make sure they are stored in a place where “inquisitive hands” cannot access them – you may be surprised how easily what we think as “safe storage” can be opened. Keep track of your narcotic supply and react if you observe an unexpected absence of some of your meds. You might want to have Naloxone handy if you do have narcotics in the house.
2. Be aware of the mental health of your children/teenagers. Are they withdrawing and isolating themselves from the rest of the family? Are you finding suspicious packaging, flyers, objects in their bedroom? Have they changed their associations/friends? Try and keep them involved in family activities and make them aware you understand that the current COVID isolation is difficult for them.
3. Discuss the rise of drug overdose deaths with your family and the risk of using street drugs of unknown origin

The following video is an excellent review and discussion of this problem and the first aid needed for its treatment. I would recommend everyone to watch it. If you have trouble opening any of the below references, copy the link into your internet browser to view the item.

Administering Naloxone

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nurz9qPGKws>

Here are additional resources that may be helpful for your review

Narcan Nasal Spray

<https://youtube.com/watch?v=WkWXX5DPmpg>

Naloxone Administration with Nasal Syringe

<https://youtube.com/watch?v=BHNeIucT728>

Naloxone Injection Video

<https://youtube.com/watch?v=0Z-y7CoeDMc>

Naloxone Administration

<https://youtube.com/watch?v=JJmCfseNtsU>

NIDA. 2022, January 11. Naloxone DrugFacts. Retrieved from
<https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/naloxone> on 2022, January 25
<https://health.ri.gov/materialbyothers/NaloxoneAdministrationSteps.pdf>

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