

# ALERT!

## Heroin, Fentanyl & the Opioid Overdose Crisis



**O**verdose deaths from opioid abuse have risen to the level of a public health emergency. While awareness of the opioid problem has grown, many changes still need to be made before there will be significant improvements.

Opioids include prescription pain relievers such as codeine, hydrocodone, meperidine, oxycodone, and methadone; synthetic opioids such as fentanyl, carfentanil, lofentanil and U4; as well as morphine and heroin. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, more than 90 Americans die every day after overdosing on opioids. Opioid addiction is a serious national crisis that affects public health as well as social and economic welfare. The total "economic burden" of prescription opioid misuse alone in the United States is estimated to be \$78.5 billion a year, including the costs of healthcare, lost productivity, addiction treatment, and criminal justice involvement.

### How did this happen?

In the late 1990s, pharmaceutical companies reassured the medical community that patients would not become addicted to prescription opioid pain relievers, and healthcare providers began to prescribe them at greater rates. This led to widespread misuse of these medications before it became clear that they could indeed be highly addictive.

The lingering painkiller addictions of former medical patients helped to create an illegal market for the drugs. In the 1990s and early 2000s, prescription opioid drugs were fairly easy to get, which helped them to become a popular and sought after street drug for the masses.

In recent years prescription drug addicts have increasingly turned to heroin as an alternative. A type of opioid itself, heroin provides a high that is similar to prescription painkillers—but heroin is cheaper and easier to get. Unfortunately heroin is just as dangerous as its prescription opioid cousins. Any street drug—whether heroin, illegal prescription opioids, or something else—carries the added risk of potentially being laced with additional harmful substances. These unknown substances often include powerful and deadly synthetic opioids such as fentanyl.

### Here are some things we know about the opioid crisis:

- Roughly 25% of patients prescribed opioids for chronic pain misuse them
- Between 8% and 12% of those prescribed opioids develop an opioid use disorder
- An estimated 4–6% who misuse prescription opioids transition to heroin
- About 80% of people who use heroin first misused prescription opioids

### What can be done about it?

- Improve access to treatment and recovery services
- Promote use of overdose-reversing drugs such as naloxone (Narcan)
- Strengthen our understanding of the epidemic through better public health surveillance
- Provide support for cutting-edge research on pain and addiction
- Encourage pharmaceutical companies and academic research centers to develop safe, effective, non-addictive strategies to manage chronic pain and find new, innovative medications and technologies to treat opioid use disorders

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