

# RISK FACTORS FOR OPIOID OVERDOSE

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Overdose occurs when a person's body has a severely harmful reaction to taking too much of a drug or a combination of different drugs.

It's possible to overdose on all types of drugs. But opioid overdoses are particularly dangerous. This is because they slow down a person's breathing.

It can be hard to know when a person is having an opioid overdose because they may seem to be sleeping. If a person is having an opioid overdose, their breathing slows to dangerous levels. This can cause brain damage and, in some cases, death.

Not everyone has the same risk of overdose. Different people will have different risks, depending on the type of opioid that they're taking, how long they've been taking it, their height and weight, and so on.

## **Key risk factors for opioid overdose are:**

- dependence on opioids
- using high-dose (strong) opioids
- using opioids over the long term
- not sticking to the prescribed opioid dose or purpose
- using other drugs such as benzodiazepines, alcohol or other sedatives
- higher-risk practices like injecting
- using opioids again after stopping for a while
- chronic health conditions such as obesity or sleep apnea

## **IF YOU ARE USING ALCOHOL**

Alcohol is a legal drug that's used by many people around the world. But alcohol is a depressant, which means it is dangerous to use with opioids.

All opioids, including those prescribed by a doctor, are dangerous to consume with alcohol.

Likewise, if you're taking opioids it's a good idea to avoid drinking alcohol. If you think you'll find it hard to stop drinking alcohol, discuss this with your doctor when they prescribe you opioids.

## **IF YOU ARE TAKING OTHER MEDICATIONS**

Some medications may interact with opioids or increase the risk of overdose. It's important that your doctor is aware of any other medication you are taking when they prescribe you opioids.

If you've been prescribed a new medication – particularly a sedative such as benzodiazepines or other analgesics – make sure you inform the prescribing doctor that you're also taking an opioid medication.

Using opioids with prescribed medications like benzodiazepines, other opioids and other sedatives is especially risky. Opioids slow down your breathing and, when these are combined with other sedatives, this effect is increased. Using multiple sedatives at the same time puts you at significant risk of overdose and can lead to brain injury and death.



# International Overdose Awareness Day

## IF YOU ARE USING DRUGS RECREATIONALLY

The illegal, non-medical and/or recreational use of all sorts of drugs is highly stigmatised. This means that people who use illegal drugs, or who use medications purely for enjoyment or other non-medical reasons, may find they're treated badly in healthcare settings.

If you're using drugs non-medically or recreationally, you may be worried that your doctor will treat you differently because of this. You may also be worried that you'll be refused certain treatments or that your doctor will focus on your drug use rather than your health needs.

These things may happen but there are a few reasons why it's still important to talk to your doctor about your drug use:

- Your doctor may be able to diagnose your symptoms better if they know your full history
- Some of the symptoms you're experiencing may be caused or affected by your drug use
- The drugs that you're taking and the medications the doctor wants to prescribe might be a harmful combination
- Being honest with your doctor helps to build trust, which can lead to better healthcare outcomes for you

These things should not be a problem if you see a doctor who specialises in dependence and addiction.

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## LEARN MORE

To learn more about opioids, opioid dependence (which may be diagnosed as Opioid Use Disorder or OUD) and about different options for treatment, visit [lifesavers.global](https://lifesavers.global)

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