

REPORTING ON OVERDOSES: BEST PRACTICES AND GUIDELINES

This guidance is for the international community of journalists, freelance writers and content producers who cover, write about and/or discuss matters of public health, and particularly, drug overdoses.

The media has a unique opportunity to play a critical role in educating the broader public on overdose awareness and substance use as a matter of public health.

The recommendations outlined on this page are synthesized from information provided by the World Health Organization (WHO) as part of their overdose education and SOS initiative, AOD Media Watch Australia, documentation provided by Shatterproof, and data collected by the U.S. National Institute of Health.

These recommendations are inspired by the professionals in other sectors who have changed the way we frame other public health issues in reporting by offering a more sensitive and fact-based framework of reference, and who have inspired hope for those seeking support and all impacted by these critical issues of public health.

Learn more by visiting us at overdoseday.com

OVERDOSE REPORTING CHECKLIST

Your 7-point checklist for reporting on overdoses in your community:

- ✓ DO – Report on overdoses as a public health issue.
- ✓ DO – Include information on spotting and preventing an overdose.
- ✓ DO – Include health services information localized to your subscribers and readership.
- ✓ DO – Report using person-first language and be sensitive to those connected to the person who has overdosed.
- ✓ DO – Ensure you have the most up-to-date facts and language about overdoses.
- ✓ DO – Ensure you de-emphasize the issue as one that is inherently criminal, moral or political.
- ✓ DO – Seek the expertise of professionals in the harm reduction, substance use treatment and overdose prevention sectors.

DO THIS...

Report on the individual involved using person-first language.

Place emphasis on the person rather than the behavior, condition or disease.

Use phrases such as “person who uses drugs”, “person experiencing substance dependence” or “person in recovery”.

HERE'S WHY

Reporting on the individual using or assigning negative language might enhance the stigma of drug use or play a role in preventing a person from seeking support.

Words like “addict”, “drug abuser”, “user” and “alcoholic” can be pejorative and isolating to people who use drugs. Person-first language is more neutral and inclusive to the vast number of people who use drugs in our communities.

DO THIS...

Report using language that does not assume or imply intent.

Preference using neutral and fact-based language. Use the terms ‘fatal’ or ‘non-fatal’ overdose.

The term ‘overdose’ is best in most cases as an accurate word describing when a person has too much of a drug – or multiple drugs – in their system for their body to manage. ‘Drug-induced death’ may also be used.

HERE'S WHY

Overdoses are inherently complex. They can be intentional, unintentional or of undetermined intent and, in fact, determining intent can be difficult. Appropriate data is often not captured or may be unclear in many cases so treading with caution is advised. Placing emphasis on intent without facts distracts the reader from the person involved, those grieving, and the broader public health issue of overdose and how it can be addressed.

Terms such as ‘drug poisoning’ or ‘drug toxicity’ are often preferred over the word ‘overdose’ to prevent readers from drawing conclusions about the person involved and their behaviors. They may also be used to draw attention to the toxic, unregulated drug supply, especially seen in North America. Yet, terms like these should be used with caution as they can contribute to the stigmatization of people experiencing dependence and can distract readers from the core issue.

Note, terminology has become increasingly contested as the crisis of opioid-involved deaths deepens, and it is important to be aware of the political implications of different terms.

DO THIS...

Report on overdose as a public health matter.

Position overdose in your work as a health issue relevant to the whole community. Emphasize that overdose can affect anyone and not only people who are experiencing dependence.

Use fact-based language, keeping information about the person, their intentions, and the scene of the overdose generic.

HERE'S WHY

Reporting on overdoses as part of local crime statistics, commenting on the morality of the person who has overdosed, or leaning into the politicized arguments can sensationalize overdose and deepen the stigma.

Reporting on overdose as a complex public health policy issue improves community understanding that overdose can affect anyone from a person experiencing many years of dependence through to a person who unknowingly used a drug for the first time.

DO THIS...

Report on the signs and symptoms of an overdose.

Include information about common signs and symptoms of an overdose, being wary that overdoses can look different depending on the drug type involved.

For more about signs and symptoms by drug type, download our [Overdose Fact Sheets](#).

HERE'S WHY

It is ok to educate the public by explaining the warning signs associated with a potential overdose. This will help the community to recognize when an overdose might be happening and take action to prevent harm, including death.

DO THIS...

Report on evidence-based overdose response practices and prevention strategies.

Include information about how to prevent or reverse an opioid overdose through access to immediate medical support and the administration of the opioid overdose reversal drug, naloxone (often called Narcan).

Ensure you have the correct information about the appropriate medical support services that should be engaged and about access to naloxone in your area. Access and availability vary greatly in each region, from being unavailable, available for a fee, or available for free and without prescription.

Include information about evidence-based overdose prevention strategies and initiatives that are in place or are being discussed and advocated for in your area, such as safe consumption sites, drug testing services, and needle exchange services.

HERE'S WHY

Fatal overdoses can be prevented when more community members know how to spot and respond to them.

Medical support should always be sought to prevent harm, including death.

For opioid overdose, naloxone or Narcan can temporarily reverse the effects of an overdose to provide enough time for a person to get medical assistance. Learn more about naloxone in our [Naloxone Fact Sheet](#).

Including information about evidence-based overdose prevention strategies improves community knowledge about what is available to reduce overdose.

DO THIS...

Report on available treatment and support options for people who use drugs.

Include information about reliable and trusted services in your area. Consider counseling services, recovery centers, harm reduction organizations, telehealth services, and localized or geographically specific programs to support people who use drugs.

HERE'S WHY

Guiding readers to information about harm reduction, treatment and other support options may encourage people to seek help if they need it.

It also provides useful information to friends and family supporting someone in their life experiencing dependence or substance use issues.

DO THIS...

Report in a manner that respects those grieving a loss.

Use language that respects those who have lost a loved one due to overdose or who may be navigating recovery and support following a non-fatal overdose.

Provide support options that may be available in your local area such as professional counselling or grief support groups.

International Overdose Awareness Day also offers people an opportunity for healing and connection with community.

HERE'S WHY

Focusing on the human element and the collateral damage of overdoses will allow you to center the story in a way that isn't harmful to the person involved, their friends, family and community.

Offering pathways for people who are experiencing loss can reduce isolation and reduce feelings commonly experienced by people who have lost someone to overdose, such as shame or guilt.

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HERE'S WHY

Experts will be able to speak about this as a matter of public health and will likely have first-hand knowledge about prevention and treatment options available locally.

While some reporting may cover solutions from a policy perspective, take care to avoid sensationalizing the topic to align with political debates and broader discussions about how to manage drug-related crimes.