

# My pain medicine: Am I at risk for an accidental overdose?

Do you know what is **TRUE** and **FALSE** about opioids (examples: prescription pain medicines or nonprescribed substances like heroin)?

**Please read this important information if you are taking any of the following:**

- codeine (Tylenol #3®)
- fentanyl (Duragesic)
- heroin
- hydrocodone (Vicodin®)
- hydromorphone (Dilaudid®)
- oxycodone (Percocet®)
- oxymorphone (Opana®)
- methadone
- morphine (MS Contin®)
- tramadol (Ultram®)

## Let us test what you know!

Please select either true or false to test what you know (*see back for answers*):



- 1 I am not at risk of an accidental overdose if I take my opioid medicine as prescribed.  
**TRUE**  or **FALSE**
- 2 Only people addicted to heroin or fentanyl are at risk of having an opioid overdose.  
**TRUE**  or **FALSE**
- 3 Certain medicines or substances can increase my risk of accidental overdose if they are combined with an opioid.  
**TRUE**  or **FALSE**

## What are opioids?

- Prescription medicines usually used to treat pain (example: oxycodone, hydrocodone)
- Illegal, illicit or street drugs (example: heroin)

## What is an overdose or drug poisoning?

- An overdose or drug poisoning is when your body has too much of a drug.
- An opioid overdose or opioid poisoning can cause you to stop breathing and die.

In the U.S. in 2020, every day  
**191 people** died of an  
opioid overdose.\*



\*Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/drug-overdose-data.htm>. Accessed July 18, 2021.

## Synthetic opioids:

**Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that is 50 times stronger than heroin and 100 times stronger than morphine.** It is prescribed to treat cancer pain and other types of severe pain. Fentanyl can also be illegally made and mixed into other drugs. It is often pressed into counterfeit pills or mixed with heroin, cocaine, or methamphetamine without the user's knowledge.

## Check your answers!

- 1 FALSE.** Opioids can cause accidental overdose even when you take them as prescribed. Many things can increase your risk: sleep apnea, lung diseases, alcohol use. Ask your provider about your risks and if an opioid is the safest way to manage your pain.
- 2 FALSE.** Any patient taking an opioid has a risk of accidental overdose. Remember, it is the opioid that can be dangerous, not the person taking it.
- 3 TRUE.** Other medicines such as benzodiazepines (Ativan®, Xanax®, Valium®) and alcohol are very dangerous when used with opioids.

## Did you know?

**An opioid overdose can occur with any dose, large or small.**

You may think you are safe because you have been taking opioids for a long time. No matter how long you have been taking opioids, you can be at risk for harm. Risks increase if you are older in age or have certain medical conditions like sleep apnea, lung conditions, reduced kidney or liver function, or smoke cigarettes or cannabis. If you stop taking opioids, even for a few days, you might lose your tolerance. This means that the dose you took before could be too much and lead to an overdose.



## What is naloxone?

Naloxone is a part of opioid safety and can lower your risk of accidental opioid overdose death. Naloxone is a medicine used in an emergency during an overdose. It can help a person start breathing again by reversing the side effects of opioids.

**Please click here or scan the QR code to see the video:**

[How to Use the VA Naloxone Nasal Spray](#)



## What can you do?

1. Talk to your provider about the risks and benefits of opioids. Find out if there are ways to reduce your risk of an accidental opioid overdose.
2. Ask your provider if naloxone is right for you.



The Veterans Crisis Line also offers free, confidential support and crisis intervention 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.  
**To reach the crisis line, call 1-800-273-8255 and press 1.**