

OPIOID CRISIS IN MASSACHUSETTS: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW



Why am I hearing so much about opioids?

Opioid use disorder affects many families in the United States, regardless of race, ethnicity, economic status, or location. Today, approximately 2.5 million Americans are addicted to opioids. As a result, more people are dying from opioid overdoses. **In Massachusetts, opioids kill close to three times as many people as do car accidents. Confirmed opioid overdose deaths in 2015 were up 18% over 2014, and up 41% from 2013 to 2014.** The powerful opioid fentanyl, in particular, has recently been mentioned in the news, as it is confirmed to have been involved in 66% of opioid overdose deaths in 2015. In addition, when prescription opioids become less available or unavailable, more people are turning to heroin. A Centers for Disease Control report found that those who misuse prescription opioids are 40 times more likely to become dependent on heroin.

What are prescription opioids?

Prescription opioids are powerful medications used to relieve pain. They are most commonly prescribed to treat pain associated with injuries, surgeries, dental procedures and long-term (chronic) medical conditions. They are known to present a risk for misuse or addiction. Commonly prescribed opioids include:

- Oxycodone (Percocet or Oxycontin)
- Hydrocodone (Vicodin)
- Fentanyl
- Morphine
- Hydromorphone (Dilaudid)
- Methadone
- Meperidine (Demerol)

What is opioid addiction, and what are its symptoms?

Opioid addiction is a physical addiction which often starts with prescription painkillers. Not everyone who uses opioids will become addicted and develop an opioid use disorder. Opioid use, especially misuse, can cause long-term changes in the structure and function of the brain, leading to addiction. These changes may make opioid addiction a chronic condition that is not easy to eliminate. Much like diabetes, hypertension or any other chronic disease, opioid addiction requires on-going treatment, maintenance, and support. Symptoms of opioid addiction may include some of the following:

- Feeling of euphoria
- Anxiety
- Confusion
- Poor judgment
- Inability to make decisions/plan
- Inability to concentrate
- Memory problems
- Cravings for the drug
- Sleepiness or feeling of relaxation
- Numbness or inability to feel pain
- Difficulty breathing, or slow/shallow breathing
- Small pupils
- Nausea and/or vomiting
- Itchiness
- Rash or flushed skin
- Constipation
- Slurred speech
- Increased tolerance to the drug
- Chest pain

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What are the warning signs that someone may have an opioid use disorder?

- Opioids are taken for longer periods of time or at higher doses than prescribed.
- Attempts to reduce the amount of opioid medication used are unsuccessful.
- Pills or medication bottles are missing from your home.
- There are abrupt changes in finances. Money may be missing from the home.
- Dramatic mood changes.
- Changes in school or work performance, changes in friends, or changes in sleep or appetite.
- Loss of concern about appearance.
- Physical signs such as fatigue, confusion, weight loss, slurred speech and dizziness.
- The individual cannot take care of his or her daily responsibilities.

What are the symptoms of overdose, and what should be done in case of overdose?

An overdose can occur minutes to hours after someone takes drugs. Symptoms of opioid overdose include:

- unresponsiveness or unconsciousness
- shallow or stopped breathing
- pale gray or blue skin, especially around the fingernails or lips
- deep and slow choking or snoring sounds
- small pupils

If someone you know is experiencing these symptoms, call 911 immediately—it is important to call 911 as soon as you find a person who is unresponsive, because overdose is a life-threatening emergency. If you have a naloxone rescue kit, you should use it immediately after calling 911. You should perform rescue breathing or mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, and continue while you wait for emergency responders to arrive or for the naloxone to take effect.

Where can I find help?

If you think you or a family member may be misusing opioids, have an opioid use disorder, or are using drugs again after having stopped before, you should talk to an Employee Assistance Program professional immediately about how to access appropriate care and support. Successful treatment is possible with individualized plans of action that may include medications to lessen cravings and prevent relapse, a period of detoxification at an outpatient or inpatient rehabilitation center, and/or counseling and behavioral therapies. Use the following resources for additional information:

- Call your Employee Assistance Program at **1-800-451-1834**
- The Commonwealth has set up a toll-free hotline where you can speak with a referral specialist. The service is free, anonymous, and interpreter services are available in over 140 languages for non-English speaking callers: **1-800-327-5050** (tty: 1-800-439-2370) Monday–Friday, 8am–10pm; Saturday–Sunday 9am–5pm
- To find a support system in your area, call SAMHSA’s national helpline at **1-800-622-HELP**, or use the service locator on their website: <http://www.samhsa.gov/>

Sources:

- Massachusetts Association of Health Plans, *The Opioid Addiction Crisis: What You Need to Know*, <http://www.mahp.com/opioid-addiction-crisis.html>
- Massachusetts Department of Health and Human Services, *Current Statistics*, <http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/gov/departments/dph/stop-addiction/current-statistics.html>
- State House News Service, *Deaths from Opioids Climbing in 2016*, <http://www.statehousenews.com/>
- Addiction Guide, *Painkillers Addiction*, <https://www.addictionguide.com/addiction/painkillers/>

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