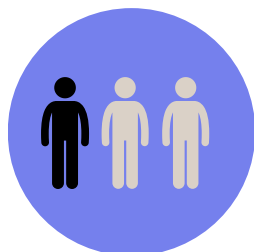


Substances At A Glance: Opioids

Approximately 1 in 10 people who use opioids report problematic or addictive use.¹



What are opioids? Opioids are a class of pharmaceutical drugs designed to relieve pain. However, they can also produce feelings of euphoria, which may cause people to use them improperly. Opioids are also available illegally and can be consumed as pills, injected through needles or intravenously, crushed up and inhaled or absorbed through the skin with a transdermal patch. When opioids are used incorrectly, they pose a risk for addiction and other serious effects.



Opioid use among youth: In Canada, 8% of youth in grades 7-12 report being prescribed opioids in the past 12 months, and 5% report using opioids for non-medical purposes.² Meanwhile, 25% of post-secondary students report using opioids in the past 12 months, a quarter of whom report high-risk use.³



Why do people use opioids? In 2018, 1 in 8 people in Canada age 15 or older were medically prescribed opioids, mostly to manage pain.¹ Non-medical reasons that young people cite for using opioids include to experience the feeling of being high, to help with sleep, as well as to self-medicate to escape painful feelings, emotions or problems in their life.



What are the effects of opioid use? When medically prescribed, opioids can provide short-term pain relief. Used recreationally, they can cause feelings of euphoria, relaxation and pleasure. Opioid use can also cause drowsiness, constipation, vomiting, headaches, dizziness and confusion. Opioid effects can be very powerful; improperly using prescription opioids or using illegal opioids can cause difficulty in breathing that can lead to fatal respiratory arrest.



Opioids and the law: Opioids are legally available with a medical prescription to manage pain after surgeries or chronic pain. Using opioids for any non-medical purpose is considered problematic use. Illegal opioids like heroin and non-regulated fentanyl are considered Schedule I substances under the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act.⁴ In Canada, producing, possessing, selling or giving these substances to others can result in criminal charges, fines and prison time.



Substances At A Glance: Opioids

The opioid crisis in Canada has contributed to over 56,000 fatalities between 2016–2025, as well as over 52,000 hospitalizations.⁵



What are the risks of problematic opioid use? Opioids can cause sexual impotence in men and irregular menstrual cycles in women. Non-medical use while pregnant can also cause miscarriage, premature birth and infant mortality. Consuming trace amounts of fentanyl or heroin can be fatal, causing a person to stop breathing. Even 2 milligrams of fentanyl is enough to kill the average adult.⁴



How can someone reduce the risks of opioid use? Opioids should only be taken by a person with a prescription from their healthcare provider. Use opioids only from trusted and regulated sources, and keep them in a secure space. Return any unused opioids to a local pharmacy and do not share them with other people. Do not mix opioids with any other drugs or alcohol as this can increase the risk of harm or death. Since an overdose can be quick and life-threatening, opioids should only be used when there is a trusted person nearby.



What is Naloxone? Naloxone is a fast-acting drug available as a nasal spray or an injectable needle. It temporarily reverses the effects of an opioid overdose. It is safe for all ages and non-addictive. However, Naloxone's effects only last 20–90 minutes, while an opioid can remain in the body for a longer period of time. If a person overdoses on opioids, they need medical attention even if they have taken Naloxone, as any improvements they show may only be temporary. Take-home naloxone kits are available for free at pharmacies in some provinces.⁶



How can I help my kids understand the risks of opioids? Have a discussion with your kids about the opioid crisis and ensure they understand the serious health risks of consuming any pills or powder they get off the street or online. If your child already uses opioids non-medically, it's important they know how to reduce their risk of an accidental overdose. Make a safety plan together, confirm they know the signs of overdose and how to administer Naloxone. Ensure they know that you will support them whenever they need to reach out for help.



The Good Samaritan Overdose Act: Someone who uses opioids may not call emergency medical services in the event of an overdose for fear they could get into legal trouble. The Good Samaritan Drug Overdose Act offers some legal protection to anyone seeking emergency support during an overdose, including the person experiencing the overdose and anyone else on the scene. The Act can protect from charges of possession of a controlled substance.⁷

Reference List

1. Statistics Canada, 2022. [Significant factors associated with problematic use of opioid pain relief medications among the household population, Canada, 2018.](#)
2. Government of Canada, 2025. [Canadian Student Alcohol And Drugs Survey, 2023–2024.](#)
3. Government of Canada, 2024. [Canadian Post-Secondary Education Alcohol & Drug Use Survey 2021–2022.](#)
4. Health Canada, 2023. [Fentanyl.](#)
5. Health Canada, 2026. [Opioid- and Stimulants-Related Harms in Canada.](#)
6. Health Canada, 2023. [Naloxone.](#)
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