

# about percs, oxys and other pain pills



## What are pain pills?

Pain pills are medicine used to relieve pain. Certain pain medications help with milder types of pain such as headaches, menstrual cramps and sore muscles. These include acetaminophen (Tylenol) and ibuprofen (Advil). There are other pain medications that contain *opioids*, a family of drugs that have powerful effects. They can be very effective and can improve quality of life for people with severe pain. However, they can also be misused.

There are two types of opioid medications:

- over-the-counter opioid medications, which include medicines such as 222s and Tylenol 1 that contain small amounts of codeine as well as other ingredients. These don't need a prescription, but they may not be any more effective than ibuprofen or acetaminophen alone.
- opioid medications that must be prescribed by a doctor or dentist, which include codeine (Tylenol 2, 3 and 4), oxycodone (Percocet, OxyNeo—which has replaced OxyContin), hydromorphone (Dilaudid), meperidine (Demerol), morphine (MS Contin, MS IR), tramadol (Tramacet, Ultram) and fentanyl (Duragesic Patch).

## What do prescription opioids look like?

Prescription opioids come in many forms, including tablets, capsules, syrups, solutions (such as methadone) and patches (such as fentanyl).



## DID YOU KNOW?

The terms "opioid," "opiate" and "opium" mean different things:

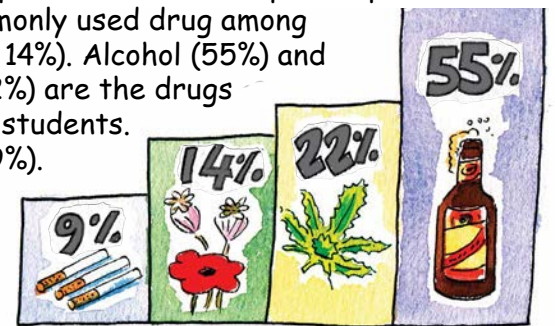
**Opium** is the drug that comes directly from the poppy plant *Papaver somniferum*.

**Opiates** are drugs made by separating and purifying the various chemicals in the poppy. Examples include codeine and morphine.

**Opioids** include all opiates, as well as synthetic and semi-synthetic opioids (man-made drugs designed to work like opiates). Examples include heroin, oxycodone and fentanyl.

## Who uses pain pills?

Prescription opioid pain pills used without a prescription are the third most commonly used drug among Ontario teens (at about 14%). Alcohol (55%) and cannabis (marijuana) (22%) are the drugs most commonly used by students. Tobacco ranks fourth (9%).



- In 2011, about 14% of Ontario students in grades 7 to 12 said that in the past year they had used a prescription opioid without a prescription at least once. This is about 140,000 students.
- Most students said they got opioids from home; specifically, 67% said they got them from a parent, sibling or someone else they live with.
- Boys and girls misuse opioid pain pills at about the same rate.
- Misuse of pain pills varies by grade. It is highest among students in grade 11 (18%).

## FAST FACTS

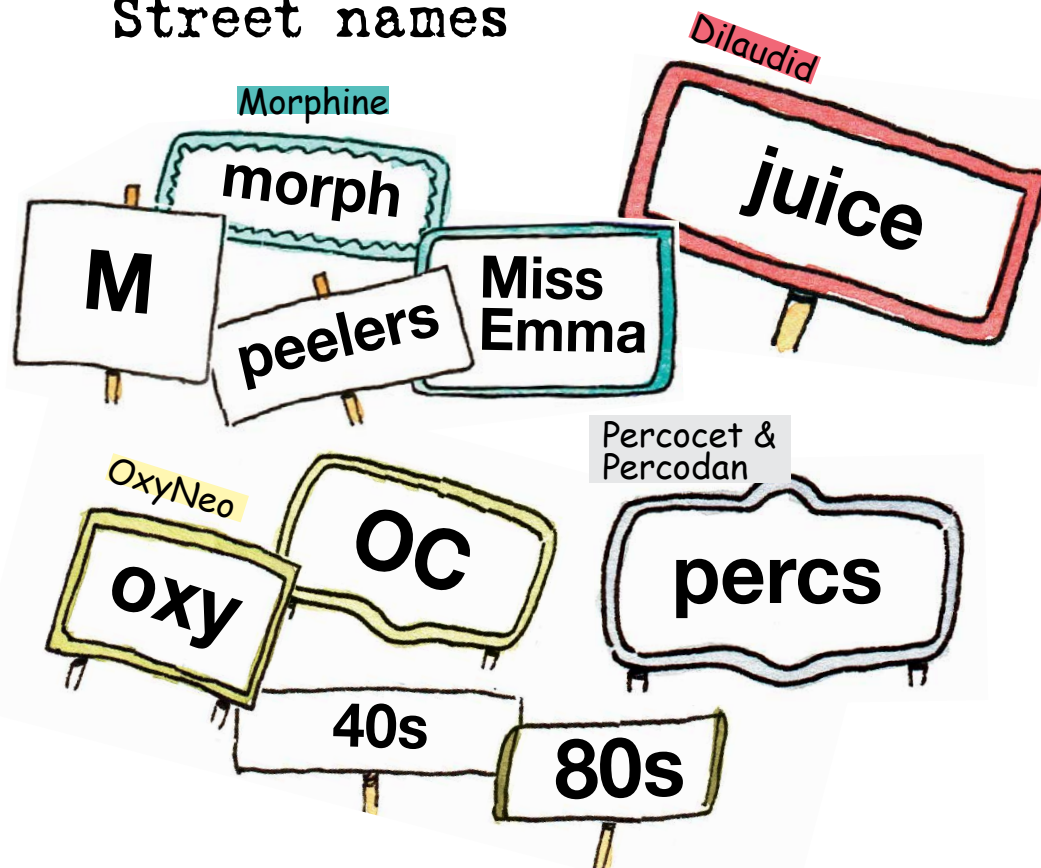
The opium poppy is native to southwestern Asia, but is now grown around the world, including Europe, the Middle East, China and India. However, many opioids available today are made in a pharmaceutical lab.

## true or false?

1. Eating poppy seed bagels could cause you to fail a drug test.
2. Prescription pills are safe for anyone to use because they have been prescribed by a doctor.
3. You can't get addicted to prescription opioids because a doctor has to prescribe them.
4. Everyone is taking prescription pills for fun.
5. Using prescription drugs is legal.

**ANSWERS:**  
 1. TRUE: You could have a positive test result (one that shows evidence of opioids) when you eat food with poppy seeds, because opioids such as codeine and morphine are present in the poppy plant.  
 2. FALSE: It's never safe to use medicine that has been prescribed for someone else. Taking someone else's prescription drugs, and/or mixing them with alcohol or other drugs, can be deadly.  
 3. FALSE: Opioids are very strong medications that may lead to addiction, whether they are prescribed by a doctor or not.  
 4. FALSE: Most people are not. In 2011, about one in seven Ontario teens said they had used prescription drugs to get high at least once in the past year.  
 5. FALSE: Using someone else's prescription drugs is against the law. If they are found in your locker or car, you can be charged with possession of drugs. You can also be charged if you give one of your own prescription pills to a friend or sell them to other students.

## Street names

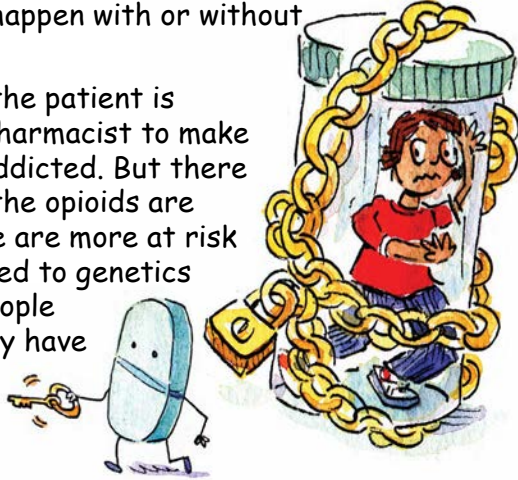


## Are pain pills addictive?

Yes, opioid pain pills can be addictive. Addiction is when a drug becomes a person's main focus, the person craves the drug, and/or he or she keeps using it even though it is causing problems.

If you use pain pills regularly—whether they are prescribed or not—your body gets used to the drug. This is called "physical dependence." It can happen with or without the problems of addiction.

When opioids are prescribed, the patient is monitored by the doctor and pharmacist to make sure he or she is not getting addicted. But there is a risk of addiction whether the opioids are prescribed or not. Some people are more at risk than others. This may be related to genetics or other life circumstances. People may also be more at risk if they have had other drug problems, including drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes.



## What are the short-term effects?

When opioids are taken to produce a high, there is an initial "rush" or surge of pleasure. Then the person may experience other effects, including:

- drowsiness, relaxation and a warm feeling throughout the body
- difficulty concentrating
- slow breathing, with the risk that breathing might stop
- nausea, vomiting, constipation, loss of appetite
- sweating
- pinpoint pupils.



With higher doses, the person feels peaceful and drowsy (being "on the nod"), and may move in and out of consciousness and have a lowered body temperature.

The effects usually wear off in three to five hours, or longer depending on which pain pill is used and how it is used. However, if the person falls asleep, their breathing may stop and they could die.

## What are the long-term effects?

Long-term use of opioids can cause:

- addiction
- mood swings
- problems with concentration and problem solving
- impaired night vision
- constipation
- decreased interest in sex
- changes in a woman's menstrual cycle.

Addiction to opioids can have devastating long-term personal, family, social, financial and emotional effects, including suicide.



**DID YOU KNOW?**

Opioids can cause an overdose, even if you take them just once!

## How do pain pills make you feel?

The way opioid pain pills affect you depends on:

- how much you use
- what kind you use (for example, one OxyNeo tablet can contain as much as 16 times the amount of oxycodone as one Percocet)
- how often and how long you use them
- how you take the drug (by injection, by mouth, swallowed whole or chewed)
- whether you have taken any alcohol or other drugs.

Opioids will reduce pain and the emotional response to pain.

They can also make you feel:

- euphoric (a high feeling)
- drowsy or relaxed
- nauseous.



## How is addiction treated?

There are treatments for opioid addiction, but no single type of treatment is effective for everyone. Treatment can include:

- withdrawal management (sometimes called detox), along with addiction counselling
- treatment with medications such as methadone or buprenorphine (Suboxone), which is most effective when combined with counselling and other support.

## What happens when you quit?

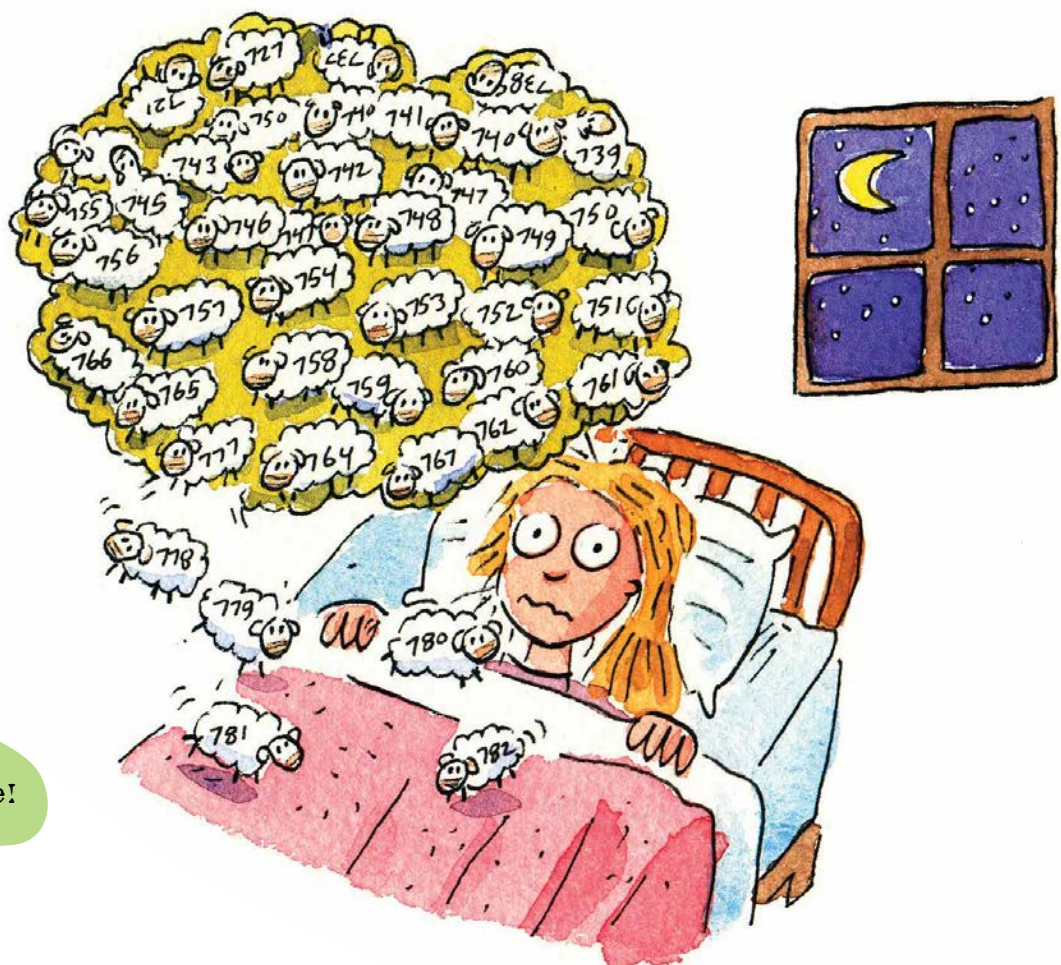
When a person is addicted to opioids, they are likely physically dependent (your body has adapted to the presence of the drug). If you suddenly stop using the drug, you will experience withdrawal symptoms.

During withdrawal, a person has a strong craving for the drug. Other withdrawal symptoms include:

- uneasiness and anxiety
- poor sleep
- yawning
- tears and runny nose
- nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal cramps
- goosebumps
- aches and pains.

The effects of some opioids, such as Percocet, last only a short time. With these opioids, withdrawal begins within six to 12 hours and is intense. With longer-acting opioids, such as methadone, withdrawal comes on more gradually, within one to three days. Symptoms of withdrawal usually lessen after a week, although some—such as anxiety, sleep problems and drug craving—may continue for a long time.

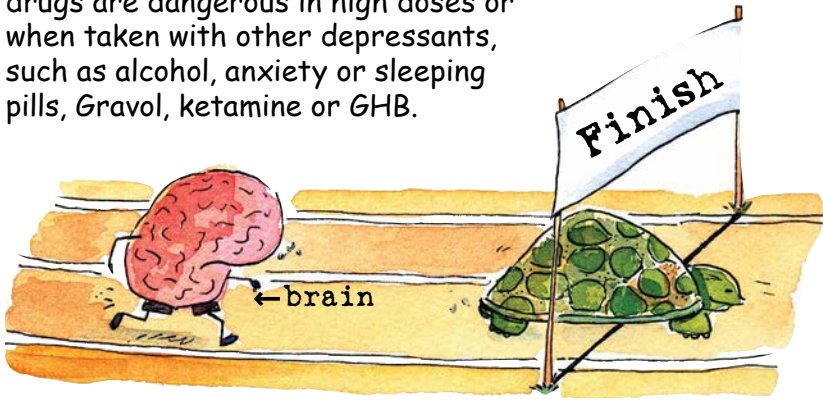
Unlike alcohol withdrawal, opioid withdrawal is rarely life-threatening, but it is very uncomfortable. However, in pregnant women withdrawal can harm the mother and the baby, and the medication should only be stopped under direction of a doctor.



## Are pain pills dangerous?

Yes, opioid pain pills can be as dangerous as street drugs. Pain pills can have harmful effects even when they are used as prescribed. When they are used without medical supervision, or combined with alcohol or other drugs, the harmful effects can increase and even be life-threatening. Here are some of the reasons:

- Opioids are depressant drugs, which means they slow down the part of the brain that controls breathing. Too high a dose can cause breathing to stop and the person to die. All opioid drugs are dangerous in high doses or when taken with other depressants, such as alcohol, anxiety or sleeping pills, Gravol, ketamine or GHB.



- People who use opioids regularly to feel high soon develop "tolerance" to these effects. This means they must use more of the drug to get the same effect. This increases the risk of overdose.
- If people with tolerance stop taking the drug, they lose their tolerance. If they then start taking the same amount again, there is a high risk of overdose.
- Some people inject opioids. Using dirty needles and sharing needles carries a high risk of infection (for example, HIV, hepatitis).
- Using opioids regularly during pregnancy can lead to miscarriage or premature birth, and it may cause withdrawal symptoms in the baby.
- Over-the-counter pain pills such as Tylenol 1 can be dangerous in high doses, because the acetaminophen they contain can cause liver and kidney damage.

## When do doctors prescribe pain pills?

Doctors and dentists prescribe prescription opioids:

- to people with severe short-term or long-term pain
- to people with moderate to severe coughs and diarrhea
- to treat addiction to other opioids (for example, methadone and buprenorphine are used to treat addiction to heroin and prescription opioids).

Because of the risk of misuse, prescription opioids are prescribed cautiously for long-term pain.



### FAST FACTS

Ancient Greeks and Romans used opium for their pleasurable effects, and possibly as medication.



### DID YOU KNOW?

Taking pain pills and driving is very much like drinking and driving. Opioids can make you drowsy and lose control of the car. Larger doses can slow your reflexes and harm your decision making.

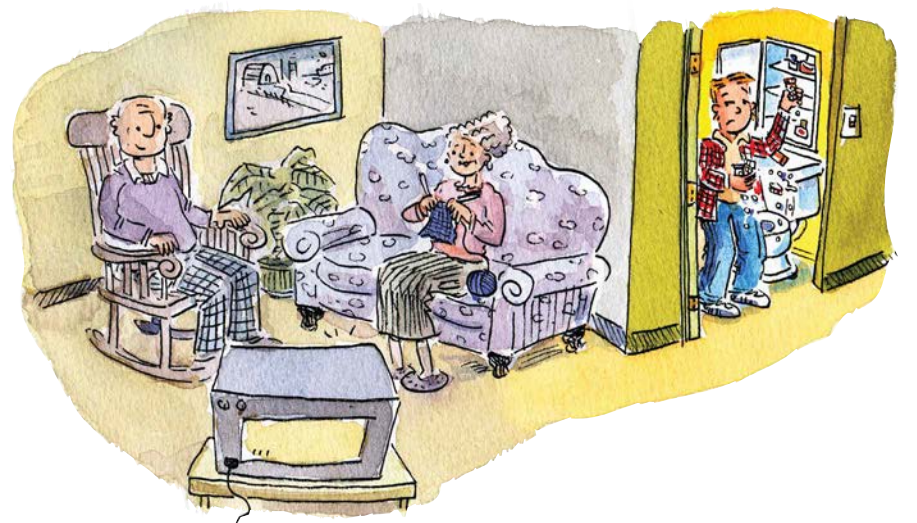


### DID YOU KNOW?

Pain pills can affect your school performance by making you sleepy and making it difficult to concentrate.



## How do people get pain pills?



### FAST FACTS

Mixing opioid pain pills with alcohol (or other depressant drugs) is a dangerous combination that can kill you.

It can make you sleepy or cause memory problems. Sometimes, it can cause breathing problems, which increases the risk of death from overdose.



- Many young people get opioid pain pills that are prescribed for someone else in their family.
- Sometimes people misuse pain pills that they have been prescribed.
- Some people get opioid prescriptions from more than one doctor, without letting the other doctors know. This is called "double doctoring" and is illegal. Sometimes people invent pain to get prescriptions illegally, or use forged prescriptions.
- Pain pills are also stolen from pharmacies and sold on the street.

## Are pain pills legal?

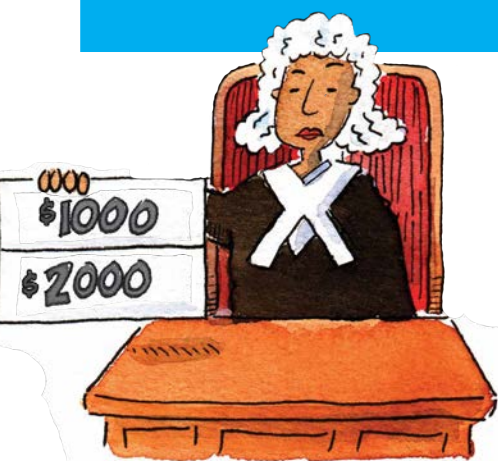
Prescription opioid pain pills are used legally in Canada if supervised by a doctor or dentist. But it is illegal for anyone without a prescription to possess, use or share prescription opioids.

Unlawful possession of opioids is a criminal offence and can result in either prison or a fine.

For less serious charges, the penalty for a first offence is a fine of up to \$1,000 and six months in prison. For subsequent offences, the penalty is a fine of up to \$2,000 and one year in prison.

When the charges are more serious, the penalty is up to seven years' imprisonment.

The maximum penalty for producing, trafficking, importing or exporting opioids is life in prison.



## How can I reduce my risks?



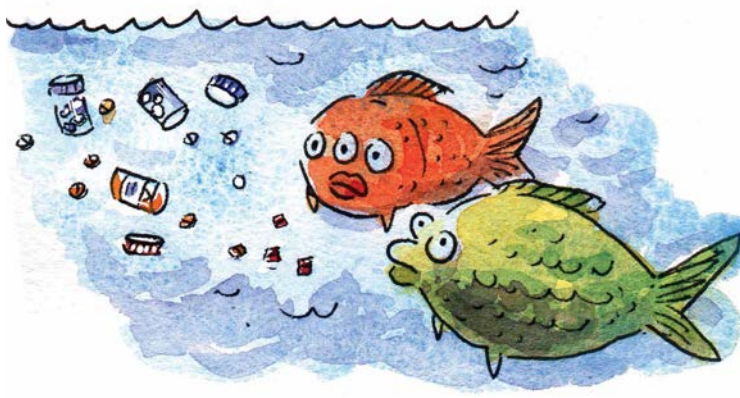
ONLY TAKE MEDICATIONS THAT ARE PRESCRIBED FOR YOU, UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF A DOCTOR OR DENTIST.



DO NOT COMBINE OPIOID PAIN PILLS WITH OTHER DEPRESSANT DRUGS, SUCH AS ALCOHOL, ANXIETY OR SLEEPING PILLS, GRAVOL, KETAMINE OR GHB.



IF YOU ARE PRESCRIBED OPIOIDS FOR PAIN RELIEF (FOR EXAMPLE, FOR AN INJURY), TALK TO YOUR DOCTOR, DENTIST OR PHARMACIST ABOUT THE BENEFITS AND RISKS.



RETURN ANY UNUSED PILLS TO THE PHARMACIST. DO NOT FLUSH UNUSED MEDICATIONS DOWN THE TOILET. IT POISONS THE WATER SUPPLY.

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**ISBN**  
978-1-77052-936-6 (PRINT)  
978-1-77052-937-3 (PDF)  
978-1-77052-938-0 (HTML)  
978-1-77052-939-7 (ePUB)

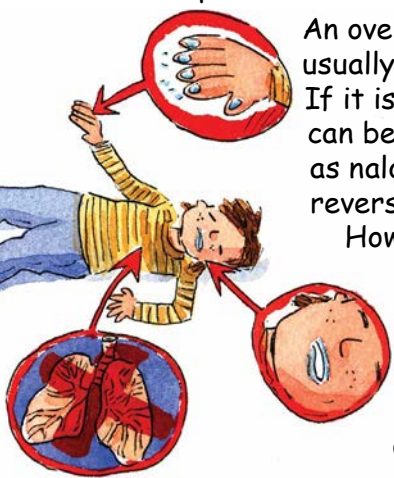
Illustrations by Craig Terlson

Disponible en français.

## What are the signs of an overdose?

Opioids slow down the part of the brain that controls breathing. Signs of overdose include:

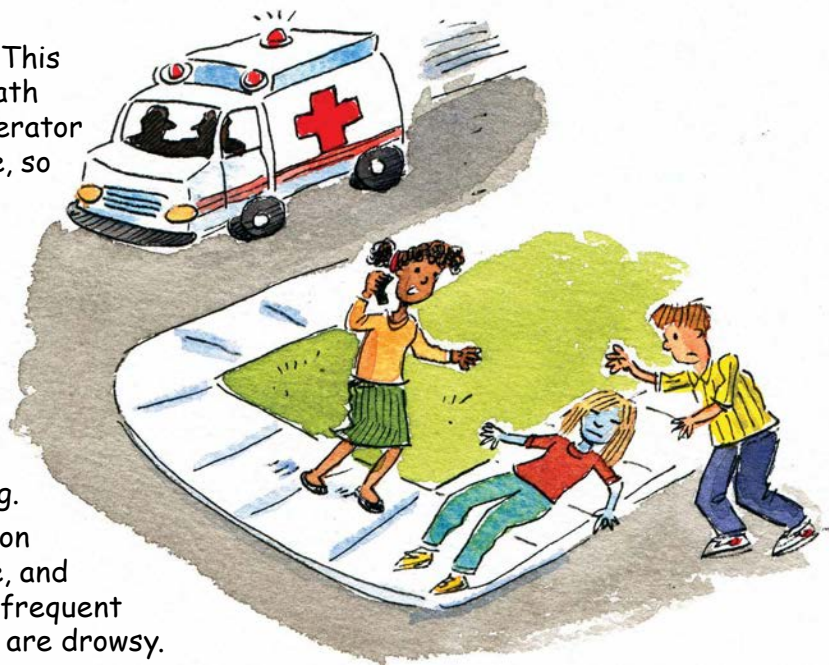
- slow breathing or no breathing
- bluish skin, lips and fingernails
- coma—the person won't "wake up."



An overdose can cause death, usually because breathing stops. If it is caught in time, an overdose can be treated with drugs such as naloxone (Narcan), which reverse the effects of opioids. However, the effects of naloxone last for only a few minutes. The person who overdosed must be taken immediately to the hospital for monitoring and additional treatment.

## What do I do if someone has an overdose?

- Check to see if the person is breathing. Look, listen and feel.
- Call 911 immediately. This could be a life-or-death situation. Tell the operator that it is an overdose, so the emergency crew can bring naloxone.
- Do not leave the person alone; wait until help arrives.
- If you must leave, turn the person on his or her side to avoid possible choking.
- Try to wake the person and keep them awake, and remind them to take frequent deep breaths if they are drowsy.



## How can I get help?

Do you, a family member or a friend have a problem with substance use? If you want help, you can talk to someone you trust, such as your doctor, a teacher, a health nurse, or a guidance or addiction counsellor. You might also want to contact an addiction assessment centre or a self-help group such as Narcotics Anonymous (look in the Yellow Pages of your phone book under "Addictions"). Here are some other places that can help:

- **Kids Help Phone:** 1 800 668-6868
- **Ontario Drug & Alcohol Helpline:** 1 800 565-8603 or [www.drugandalcoholhelpline.ca](http://www.drugandalcoholhelpline.ca)
- **CAMH Intake:** 416 535-8501 ext. 6128 (in Toronto)



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