

INFO SHEET

Prescription opioids, including fentanyl:



What **parents** and **caregivers** need to know

Bottom Line

Opioid misuse can be very dangerous, and even deadly.

Misuse of opioids is common amongst young people.

Most of those who use this drug take it from family members without them knowing.

The risk of overdose is high.

With fentanyl, even small amounts can kill, and because it is sometimes mixed into other street drugs, young people may not be aware they are putting themselves at great risk.



What are prescription opioids?

When used appropriately, prescription opioids can be very effective in treating severe pain. There are two types of opioid medications:

1. Over-the-counter opioids, which include drugs containing codeine, such as Tylenol 1 or some cough syrups.
2. Opioids that must be prescribed by a doctor or dentist which include stronger pain medications like Tylenol 2, 3 and 4, Percocet, and OxyNeo (replaced OxyContin) and the fentanyl patch.

Unfortunately, these medications are also now some of the most commonly misused substances amongst Ontario youth.

Why should I be concerned about prescription opioid misuse?

Many parents and caregivers may not realize the extent of prescription opioid misuse among youth. According to results from the 2015 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey (OSDUHS), misuse of prescription opioids has replaced tobacco as the fourth most commonly used drug among Ontario teens (at about 10%), behind alcohol, marijuana and e-cigarettes. Survey findings show that students in grades 7 and 8 are misusing opioids in greater numbers than marijuana. Misuse peaks in grade 12, when 13% of students reported using opioid prescription painkillers without a prescription in the last year.

Parents and caregivers also may not realize how harmful misuse of these drugs can be. Many people think that because opioid painkillers are prescribed medicines they are not as dangerous as other drugs like cocaine or methamphetamine. This is a myth. Opioids 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 can be life-threatening.

What is fentanyl?

Fentanyl is a powerful prescription medication, 100 times stronger than morphine, that is usually prescribed for severe pain, such as experienced with cancer. It is manufactured under strict guidelines and should only be used under medical supervision.

Sometimes prescribed fentanyl patches are sold on the illegal drug market and accessed by young people. Fentanyl can also be produced illegally here, or smuggled into Canada from other regions. Use of illegally-produced fentanyl is particularly risky because it is impossible to know the strength and composition of the drugs. Even very small doses of fentanyl, as little as the size of two grains of salt, can be lethal. In addition, illegally-produced fentanyl can be found in counterfeit prescription pills, and cut into other drugs including those sold as heroin, cocaine and ecstasy. For these reasons, a person may not even know that they are using fentanyl.

Fentanyl has been found in fake prescription pills, which are made to look like opioid prescription pain relievers. It has also been cut into other street drugs, such as cocaine and heroin. Students may not know they are taking this drug. It does not have a color, taste or smell, making it very difficult to detect.



59% of teens said they used opioids found at home.

How do young people get access to prescription opioids?

Most young people report that they access opioids from home. In the OSDUHS survey, 59% of teens who indicated they had misused prescription opioids said they took them from a parent, sibling or someone else they live with. As noted above, when youth get drugs from friends or street sources, they may not be aware they are using fentanyl, as it can be hidden in other drugs.

How can I help prevent problems?

- Create opportunities for your children to talk to you about their feelings and experiences. Start early when children are young and maintain that connection with your teens even as they are gaining independence. Let them know you are there for them when they need to talk.
- Create the opportunity for open and clear communication about medication and drug use. Consider using the Youth Info-Sheet about opioids and fentanyl as a tool for discussing these drugs and their effects and risks. Ensure that family members know to call 911 if an overdose is suspected.
- Negotiate clear rules with your teen about the appropriate use of prescription opioids for medical purposes (e.g., never take prescription opioids with alcohol or other medication, never share medication prescribed to you with others).
- If you or your teen needs pain relief, talk to your health care provider about trying alternatives to opioids first (e.g., ibuprofen or acetaminophen). If opioids are needed, try a less powerful type of opioid first, and ask for an opioid prescription with fewer pills.
- Keep opioids and all other drugs in a safe and secure place—if possible, locked in a security box or cabinet.
- When you are taking prescription opioids for a medical concern, keep track of the number of pills in a container. If the number of pills doesn't match your normal use or you need to refill your prescription sooner than expected, someone else may be taking your medication.
- Model safe and appropriate use of medication and other legal substances that you may use, such as alcohol.
- Always follow the directions on the label of prescribed medication. Call your health care provider if you have questions. Never share your medication.
- At least once a year, clean out your medicine cabinet and bring leftover or old medications to your local pharmacist for safe disposal. Do not flush medications or throw them in the garbage.
- Spread the word. Ask your friends and family to put these tips into action in their homes. Share this information with others.

How do I recognize the signs of a problem?

Signs of a problem with opioids or other substances may include:

- mood changes (e.g. irritability, depression or agitation)
- personality changes
- dropping grades or failing classes
- lack of interest in school or other activities
- changes in energy, sleep or appetite
- change in friends or hangout locations
- secretiveness
- borrowing money or having extra cash.



Around the house, watch for missing pills or unfamiliar pills. If your teen has a prescription, keep control of the bottle and be aware if they run out of pills too quickly, lose pills or request refills.

What should I do if I suspect my child might be misusing opioids?

- Pick a good time to have a quiet conversation—when everyone is calm and there are no distractions. Raising the issue when you are angry or when the young person is under the influence of opioids is not a good idea.
- Let your teen know that you care, and that is why you are asking them about this.
- Refer to specific events that have concerned you. Talk about what you observed in a factual, honest but tactful way. For example, “I’m really concerned about you. You didn’t seem to be yourself when you came home last night. Tell me about what’s going on for you so I can help you the right way”.
- Ask questions that encourage your teen to talk rather than to give yes or no answers. Allow empty space and let your child fill in these spaces with their words.
- Focus your comments on the effects that opioid misuse has on them, you, and others in the family.
- Offer support. Let your teen know that you are prepared to help change things that may be contributing to his or her use of opioids.
- Get support from someone you trust, like a family member, friend, counselor, doctor or faith leader.
- Learn as much as you can about prescription painkillers and other opioids and find the help that is available in your community.



What are the signs of an overdose?

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

- person can’t be woken up
- breathing is slow or has stopped
- snoring or gurgling sounds
- fingernails and lips turn blue or purple
- pupils are tiny (pinned) or eyes are rolled back
- body is limp.

What is a naloxone kit and what can I do in case of an overdose?

Naloxone (Narcan) is a medication that can temporarily stop or reverse an opioid overdose. Naloxone can be used to treat an overdose, if it is given fast enough the individual will resume breathing. However, the effects of naloxone are shorter than the effects of opioids, and oxygen deprivation for a period of time can have harmful effects. The person who overdosed must be taken immediately to the hospital for monitoring and additional treatment.

In case of a suspected overdose, you should:

- 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 a suspected 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 their side to avoid possible choking.
- Try to keep them awake and remind them to take frequent deep breaths if they are drowsy.
- If you are concerned about people you know misusing opioids, you can get a naloxone kit from a local public health unit or some local pharmacies. To find the closest place to get a naloxone kit and training on how to use it, visit: www.ontario.ca/page/where-get-free-naloxone-kit

**IF YOU SUSPECT AN
OVERDOSE, CALL 911
IMMEDIATELY**

Where can I get help?

Every journey begins with a single step. The first step toward taking action on substance use concerns is usually a telephone call.

For more information about options in your community, talk to your doctor or contact ConnexOntario's Drug & Alcohol Helpline at 1 800 565-8603 or www.connexontario.ca or www.drugandalcoholhelpline.ca

If your teen is looking for resources, instruct them to call Kids Help Phone: 1 800 668-6868. www.kidshelpphone.ca

For more information on opioid misuse in the province contact Public Health Ontario at www.publichealthontario.ca

Adapted with permission from CAMH's Youth and prescription painkillers.