

Why are we hearing so much about opioids in the news?

There has been an increasing number of deaths related to opioids over the past couple of years. In Ontario (2015) 734 people died related to opioid overdoses. In the first half of 2016, the province confirmed that there were 412 opioid overdose deaths. A large number of these deaths were attributable to Fentanyl.

What is the situation in Simcoe - Muskoka? There were 43 opioid related deaths in Simcoe-Muskoka in 2015. The rates of visits to the emergency department for opioid overdoses in Simcoe-Muskoka are significantly higher than the provincial rate.

Approximately 1 in 5 say that it would be very or fairly easy for them to get opioids without a prescription. Even though opioid related emergency room visits are lowest among youth it is important that students are aware of the opioid overdose situation. Fentanyl and similar drugs (i.e. Carfentanil) are being added to/mixed in with other illicit drugs (for example, fake pain pills, cocaine, and ecstasy), thereby putting the person using the drug at risk for opioid poisoning/overdose.

How can I talk to students about Opioids?

The Ontario Health and Physical Education (2015) curriculum provides an opportunity for educators to discuss health topics such as substance use, including the effects and consequences associated with use of prescription and non-prescription and illicit drugs.

For elementary educators, there are links in the Grade 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 curriculum under Strand C- Healthy Living. For secondary educators, there are links in the PPL10, PPL20, PPL30, & PPL40 courses under the same strand. Discussions and teaching about opioids can be incorporated into overall and specific expectations under all three subheadings within the Healthy Living Strand: Understanding Health Concepts, Making Healthy Choices and Making Connections for Healthy Living. These discussions can also enhance Living Skills for students.

Additionally, discussions or questions related to opioid use may arise in other courses, particularly at the secondary level. For example, specific expectations related to effects of drug use and social challenges, are present in the Technological Education (TPJ20) and Social Sciences and Humanities (HHG4M, HPC30) curriculum.

What are opioids?

Opioids are a family of drugs used to treat pain and are often referred to as prescription painkillers. Some familiar names include: Codeine, Morphine, Demerol, Percocet, Hydrocodone, Dilaudid, Fentanyl, etc. They are most often prescribed as a pill, but are also available in a patch, as a liquid or injectable form. Heroin is also an opioid. Opioids work by blocking the brain's sensation of pain. They can also affect the pleasure center of the brain, causing a sense of euphoria, which is why they are sometimes misused to get high.

Are opioids dangerous? Yes, they can be.

- Opioids are depressant drugs, which means that they slow down the part of the brain that controls breathing.
- Prescription opioids can be just as dangerous as illegal opioid drugs such as heroin, especially when they are used improperly, not taken as prescribed or used with other drugs like alcohol.
- All opioid drugs are dangerous when taken in large quantities.
- People who use opioids regularly for their pleasurable effects soon develop tolerance to these effects, which means they need to use more and more of the drug to achieve the desired effect. As the amount taken increases, so does the risk of overdose.
- If people with tolerance stop taking the drug, they lose their tolerance. If they then resume taking the same amount they took before they stopped, the risk of overdose is extreme.

Are youth using these substances more?

When it comes to Ontario teens' use of drugs, the non-medical use of prescription opioids (using them without a prescription) ranks third, after alcohol and cannabis. Between 2013 and 2015, this use went down significantly to 1 in 10 students (10%), continuing a downward trend that started a few years ago (in 2007, 20.6% of students reported the non-medical use of opioids). Although the numbers are relatively small, it is important to educate youth about the risks associated with opioid use.

Where do youth get opioids?

The majority (59%) of students who admitted to the non-medical use of prescription opioids said they obtained the drug from someone at home. Parents should be advised to:

- keep any and all medications in a safe and secure place;
- keep track of the number of pills on hand; if pills are missing, someone else may be taking the medication;
- return any unused or expired medications to a pharmacy for safe disposal.

What is Fentanyl? How is it used? What does it look like?

Fentanyl is a powerful synthetic opioid, prescribed by a doctor, usually in the form of a patch and often used for severe pain associated with chronic medical conditions, such as cancer. Fentanyl is much stronger than other opioids (100 times stronger than morphine and 40 times stronger than heroin).

Why is there so much talk about Fentanyl?

Since Fentanyl is so powerful, the patch can be manipulated and used to get high. The concern currently is non-prescription/illicit/bootleg Fentanyl which is made in illegal labs as a powder or pills. Counterfeit pills can be made to look almost the same as prescription drugs. Because it can't be seen, smelled or tasted, the powder version can be mixed into other drugs such as heroin, cocaine, ecstasy and people do not know that they are taking Fentanyl. A very small amount of Fentanyl can lead to an overdose causing death. As a result, overdose deaths are not confined to individuals who have addictions. Occasional and first-time experimenters now risk death every time they use illicit drugs.

What is an overdose?

Opioids affect the part of the brain which regulates breathing. When a person uses more of a drug, or a combination of drugs, than the body can handle, the brain is not able to control basic life functions, like breathing. If there is no intervention, then the individual will stop breathing and die.

What is Naloxone?

Naloxone is a medication that can temporarily reverse the effects of an overdose related to an opioid such as Fentanyl, Heroin and Morphine. It actually 'kicks' the opioid off of the receptor in the brain, temporarily blocking its harmful effects and helping the person breathe again. It starts to work in 1-5 minutes and works for about 30-90 minutes. Naloxone only works with opiates. It does not prevent overdoses with Alcohol, Cocaine, Ecstasy, LSD etc. but, it would not cause any harm if it was given in circumstances where opioids were not used. Take-home Naloxone kits and training are available free of charge and without a prescription for those at risk for an overdose and their family and friends. Naloxone kits are available at the health unit and many pharmacies across the region. Call your pharmacy ahead of time to make sure a Naloxone kit is available.

Aren't street drugs more harmful than prescription medications?

Many young people mistakenly believe that prescription opioids are safer than street drugs. They think that because opioids are prescribed medicines that using these drugs is not as dangerous as using drugs such as cocaine or methamphetamine. This is a myth. Opioids are powerful medications. It is illegal for anyone without a prescription to possess, use or share prescription opioids.

Why do young people misuse opioid prescriptions?

Teens may use opioids non-medically for pleasure or to help them handle stress, because:

- they don't understand the risk of taking drugs not prescribed for them;
- they think the drugs are safe to use because they are made in a regulated facility and have been prescribed by a physician/dentist;
- prescription opioids are easier to get than street drugs;
- they have not learned other ways to help them cope with stress or unpleasant feelings.

Youth may use cannabis, alcohol and perhaps other drugs. Are there risks with these too?

There is harm associated with the use of any drug. Drinking too much alcohol in a short period of time can lead to alcohol poisoning, a potentially life-threatening situation. Regular marijuana use by teenagers is particularly concerning because their brains are still developing and maturing. Regular use can potentially affect their mental health and their ability to learn and make good decisions.

What might happen if they use different drugs at the same time?

Mixing any drugs is not a good idea. When cannabis is combined with alcohol the results can be unpredictable and the effects of either drug may be more powerful, resulting in greater impairment than had either of the drugs been used alone. Since both alcohol and opioids slow down breathing, the risk of an overdose increases when they are taken together.

Can someone become addicted to a drug after one use?

There is no easy answer to this common question. If and how quickly someone becomes addicted to a drug depends on many factors, including their biology (genes, for example), age, gender, environment, and interactions among these factors. While one person may use a drug one or many times and suffer no ill effects, another person may become addicted after a few uses.

What are some of the signs that a student may have a problem?

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

- mood changes (irritability, depression or agitation);
- personality changes;
- 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.

Become familiar with your school, board and community resources for supporting students who appear to be struggling with substance misuse. Education is key in supporting students to make informed decisions. Resilient students are less likely to use/misuse drugs.

Where can I refer a student who may need help?

- ConnexOntario, Drug and Alcohol Helpline: Provides free and confidential health services information for people experiencing problems with alcohol, drugs, mental health or gambling. 1 800 565-8603 or www.drugandalcoholhelpline.ca.
- Kids Help Phone: 24/7 counselling online or on the phone at 1 800 668-6868 or www.kidshelpphone.ca.
- Good2talk: Free, confidential and anonymous helpline (24/7/365) for post-secondary students (17-25) in Ontario that provides professional counselling and information and referrals on mental health, addictions and well-being. 1-866-925-5454, www.good2talk.ca.

Where to get more information...

- Call Health Connection at 1-877-721-7520 / 705-721-7520
- Info-Sheet for educators, parents and youth- www.smh-assist.ca/blog/new-info-sheet-on-opioid-misuse/
- Opioid facts- www.simcoemuskokahealth.org/Topics/drugs/opioids
- Provincial Naloxone program-where and how to get a kit- www.ontario.ca/page/get-naloxone-kits-free