

HEALTH IN OUR HANDS!

The Arkansas State University Wellness Program Newsletter
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The Opioid Epidemic

Introduction

First, what is an opioid? There are both legal and illegal opioids. The legal opioids are pain medicines prescribed by a doctor. Heroin is an illegal opioid and prescription pain killers are illegal to take without a prescription. Some common prescription opioids include:

- Hydrocodone (Vicodin)
- Oxycodone (OxyContin)
- Morphine
- Methadone (synthetic)
- Fentanyl (synthetic)

When taken responsibly and as directed by your doctor and pharmacist, these medicines can relieve pain. However, they are highly addictive and misuse can result in overdose and death. Heroin is an illicit drug that falls into the opioid category as well. Often, people begin using prescription opioids and eventually end up using heroin as a cheaper and more easily obtained alternative. This has been an issue across the country with rates of opioid-related overdoses and deaths rising dramatically over the past several years. In Arkansas, the opioid crisis more often involves prescription medication. However, we do have regions of the state that are greatly affected by heroin use and overdose. Arkansas has been hit hard by the opioid crisis and, unfortunately, most of us know

someone who has been affected by this.

Opioids in America

Overdose and death from prescription opioids began to rise sharply in the early 2000's according to the FDA. Since then, efforts have been made to improve the safe use of these drugs. However, opioid use is trending upward across the country. The following are statistics from the CDC that depict this national struggle:

- Opioid overdoses were highest among 25-54 year olds between 1999 and 2014.
- Almost 2 million Americans abused or were dependent on prescription opioids in 2014.
- 1 in 4 people with a long-term prescription for opioids in a primary care setting struggle with addiction.
- From 2014 to 2015, death rates from synthetic opioids, namely Fentanyl, increased by 72.2% and heroin death rates increased by 20.6%.

Our campus is largely made up of students that are in the age group in which overdoses are the highest. Also, addiction can happen to

people who are prescribed opioids, not just those who are abusing them. According to the Surgeon General's letter, opioid overdoses have quadrupled since 1999 but the amount of pain reported by Americans has not increased. So, although we are not experiencing more pain, we are obtaining more pain prescriptions. As people receive more prescriptions, more opioids become available for possible misuse. According to the Turn The Tide initiative of the Surgeon General, more than 65% of people misusing opioids are getting them from friends and family. Prevent misuse and abuse by not sharing prescription medicines and disposing of them correctly.

Opioids in Arkansas

The CDC has put out statistics relating to opioids in Arkansas, as well, and they are shocking:

- Arkansans averaged 114.6 opioid prescriptions per 100 people in 2016.
 - The 2nd highest in the US.
- Craighead county has 157.3 opioid prescriptions per 100 people as of 2016.
 - The 7th highest in AR.

Arkansas State University is located in Craighead county,

which is one of the counties with the most opioid prescriptions written within the state that has the most prescriptions written in the country. **In both instances, there are more opioid prescriptions written than there are people.** Most people obtain opioid medications from their friends and family, so the more pills available, the more that are shared or sold.

Taking Opioids for Pain

The opioid epidemic does not discriminate between race, gender, socioeconomic status, or any other parameter. It is an equal opportunity crisis and no person is immune. According to the CDC, between 2014 and 2015, death rates involving heroin and synthetic opioids (Fentanyl) increased across all demographic groups. If prescribed opioid pain medications, the Surgeon General has some steps to follow to avoid risk of addiction or overdose:

1. Start low and go slow. Want to take the lowest dose for the shortest amount of time possible.
2. Never take more than prescribed.
3. Avoid taking opioids with alcohol.
4. Avoid mixing opioids with the following medications unless instructed by your doctor:
 - a. Sedatives
 - b. Muscle relaxants
 - c. Sleeping pills
 - d. Other opioids
5. Follow up with your doctor regularly about whether the medicine is working, side effects, or signs of opioid use disorder.

6. If taking opioids for an extended time, taper down dose as your pain subsides as directed by your doctor.

Prevent Misuse

The CDC lists many recommendations to prevent opioid misuse. These include working with your doctor to manage your pain, know your options, and address concerns. A large part of preventing opioid abuse is taking and storing your medication properly. Some suggestions are:

- Never sell or share prescription opioids.
- Store in a secure place, out of reach of others.
- Find your community drug take-back program and dispose of any unused prescription medicines through their drop off.

In our community, there are two Arkansas Take Back drop off locations for prescription drugs:

- Arkansas State University Police Department on campus
 - 2105 Aggie Rd.
Jonesboro, AR 72401
- Jonesboro Police Department
 - 1001 S. Caraway Rd.
Jonesboro, AR 72401

Other locations can be found by going to the AR Take Back website at artakeback.org.

Responding to Overdose

To respond to an overdose, you must first be able to recognize the signs of an overdose:

- Slow, shallow breathing
- Extreme sleepiness

- Inability to talk
- Blue skin color and dark-colored lips
- Snoring or gurgling sounds

How should you respond? Try to arouse the person and call 911. Try to keep the person awake. If the person is not breathing and you are trained, perform CPR. Stay with them until emergency personnel arrive.

The latest drug for treating opioid overdose is a nasal spray called Narcan (nalaxone). It can immediately reverse the effects of opioids and only takes about 5 minutes to take effect. Narcan has been saving many lives. Most pharmacists, doctors, EMTs, and police officers have been trained to administer it.

References

- <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/data/overdose.html>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/maps/rxccounty2016.html>
- <https://www.fda.gov/Drugs/DrugSafety/InformationbyDrugClass/ucm338566.htm>
- <https://turnthetidex.org/#>
- <https://turnthetidex.org/for-patients/#>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/patients/prevent-misuse.html>
- <http://www.artakeback.org/Default.aspx?CCID=20447&FID=129895&ExcludeBoolFalse=True&PageID=13761060>
- <https://www.asahq.org/whensecondscout/pain-management/opioid-treatment/opioid-abuse/>

Other News:

**If you have any suggestions for newsletter topics, please contact Dean Susan Hanrahan at hanrahan@astate.edu.

The Arkansas State University Employee Wellness Newsletter is published monthly during the academic year by the College of Nursing and Health Professions. Health questions can be addressed to Dean Susan Hanrahan, Ph.D., ext. 3112 or hanrahan@astate.edu. Produced by Katie Sellers, graduate student in the College of Nursing and Health Professions, Physical Therapy Program.