



What Should Parents Know About the Opioid Crisis?

The opioid crisis has received a lot of attention in our region this past year. Here are some frequently asked questions about opioids and prescription drugs and some things that parents should know.

What are opioids? The term opioid refers to a drug or chemical that attaches to sites in the brain called opioid receptors. Opioids are used to reduce pain. They are also very addictive. Examples of prescription opioids include: Oxycontin, Percocet, Vicodin, Demerol, Morphine, Methadone, and Dilaudid. Heroin is also an opioid.

What is prescription drug misuse? Misusing prescription drugs is a key risk factor for developing an addiction. In fact, 4 out of 5 people who are addicted to heroin started with prescription drug misuse. Misuse includes:

- Taking a medication that was not prescribed to you
- Taking a medication that was prescribed to you at a higher dose or for longer than was prescribed
- Taking a medication for any reason other than what it was prescribed to you for (e.g. for the feeling it causes or to get high)

How do people start misusing opioids? 70% of the time, a family member or friend gives them a pill. That's how it starts. Sharing any kind of medicine is not a good idea, even if you think it will help your loved one feel better. If your loved one is in pain, send them to their doctor instead.

“Not my kid, my kid would never use drugs, he was a Marine. Well guess what, he did.”

— Patti Scalesse, speaking about her son's battle with addiction

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What are the signs of opioid misuse? There are many signs of opioid misuse. Keep in mind that someone dealing with an opioid addiction may only show just a few of these signs.

- Small or “pinpoint” pupils
- An overall unhealthy look
- Weight loss
- Vomiting
- Constipation
- “Nodding off” to sleep
- Laxative use
- In females, not getting a period
- Depression
- Track marks on arms (scars or bruises from using needles)
- Itches and scratches on the skin
- Loss of friendships
- Problems in school or at work
- Lose interest in activities
- More time spent away from home
- Frequent, secret phone calls
- Trouble with the police
- Missing money, credit cards, and/or valuables
- Pawn slips
- Purchases returned for refunds
- Small plastic Ziploc bags
- Bottles of vinegar and bleach and cotton balls
- Aluminum foil or chewing gum wrappers with burn marks
- Spoons with burn marks or missing spoons

When people who are dependent on opioids stop taking them suddenly, they may have different symptoms as their body reacts. This is called withdrawal. Symptoms of opioid withdrawal include:

- Diarrhea
- Sweating
- Dilated (very big) pupils

- Irritability (moodiness)
- Anxiety (feeling worried or nervous)
- Trouble sleeping
- Talking about craving medicines or drugs
- Complaining about pain — especially stomach cramps, muscle aches, and bone pain

What can I do to prevent opioid misuse and addiction among my family and friends?

Pay very close attention to the prescription drugs in your home. Access to prescription drugs is a key risk factor. Steps to take:

- **If you use prescription medications, make sure you are the only one using them.**
- **Lock up all prescription drugs.** Use a safe or a lockbox that is bolted to something that cannot be moved. Make sure only you have access to the medicines.
- **Keep an eye on how many pills you have.** Use a log or a calendar to track how many pills you should have left in each bottle.
- **Return leftover prescription drugs right away.** Giving back extra pills helps keep others safe. Bring your extra pills to a MedReturn Drug Collection Box. The following Franklin County Police Departments have a collection box: Athol, Deerfield, Erving, Greenfield, Montague, Orange, Sunderland.
- **Get rid of leftover medications even if you don't have access to a MedReturn Box.** Follow these steps for getting rid of leftover medication:
 - Take the extra pills out of their original bottle. Use a permanent marker to black out any personal information on the prescription bottle.
 - Mix the pills with something you can't eat — like cat litter or coffee — so that pets and children won't accidentally eat them.
 - Put the pill mix in a sealable bag or empty container. That way the pills will be hard to recognize if someone looks through your trash — and it won't leak.
 - Throw everything (pill mix and empty pill bottle) in the trash. Don't flush pills — they're not good for our water.
- **If you are taking prescription opioids talk to your doctor about your pain management options.** There are many alternative and non-medication treatments that can help with your pain.
- **Intervene early.** If you suspect a loved one may be addicted to opioids, get help as soon as possible. For treatment providers in Massachusetts go to: www.helpline-online.com.

For more information visit the Medicine Abuse Project at medicineabuseproject.org and the Opioid Task Force at www.opioidtaskforce.org