

## The opioid problem

In cities and towns across America, 130 people die each day after overdosing on opioids. The annual death rate is nearing 50,000 people per year, more fatalities than car crashes or gun deaths. A recent study revealed that opioids have affected longevity. Opioids are reducing the average American life expectancy by over a third of a year.

*Opioid* is a catch-all term for a class of drugs that work on the central nervous system to relieve pain. They include drugs that are both natural and manmade in origin. Natural opioids include such controlled narcotics as opium and heroin, derived from the poppy plant. These have been adapted into compounds such as morphine, codeine and recently, oxycodone, hydrocodone and other drugs. These powerful opioids were once used for pain management in terminal cancers but are now often prescribed for more commonplace injuries and conditions. Even more recently, the synthetic fentanyl has been developed, produced both legally and on the black market. This is a drug that is 50-100 times more powerful than morphine.

All opioids share the property of being addictive. Not only do they relieve pain, they also activate the brain's pleasure receptors. Opioids can cause low blood pressure, a slowed breathing rate and potential for breathing to stop, or a coma. Overdose has a significant risk of death. Taking opioids with alcohol or sedatives increases this risk.

Prescription drug abuse is the use of medication in a way not intended by the prescribing doctor. Signs of prescription drug abuse include: Taking higher doses than prescribed; combining prescriptions with alcohol or other drugs; administering the drug in non-prescribed ways such as grinding or snorting a pill that is meant to be swallowed; experiencing difficulty when trying to stop or limit the drug; having drug use that interferes with work, family or relationships; and continuing drug use even in the face of negative consequences.



Many hard-working people stumble into addiction post-surgery or post-injury, being unaware of the addictive properties of the drugs. Pain medication can be important to recovery, but you need to be an educated and informed consumer. Here are problem prevention tips from public health authorities:

- Use pain medications only as prescribed and follow dosage instructions.
- Tell your doctor about any other prescriptions or over-the-counter medicines you take.
- Don't stop or change a regimen without talking to your physician.
- Learn about potential interactions with other drugs and any addictive properties of the drug.
- Only use medications from a trusted pharmacy.
- Never take someone else's medication.
- Never share your prescriptions.
- Store drugs in a secure place.
- Avoid alcohol entirely while on prescribed pain medication. Combining small amounts can be lethal.
- Dispose of any unused pills properly.
- Google to learn about the next **National Prescription Drug Take-Back Day - April 27, 2019.**

### Your EAP can help

If you think you or a loved one may have a drug dependence, your EAP can help. Effective treatment is available. Give us a call today to speak with a professional, nonjudgmental counselor. Remember, conversations with your EAP are confidential.