

What educators need to know

Bottom Line

Opioid misuse can be very dangerous, and even deadly.

Misuse of opioids is common amongst young people.

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 versions of codeine (Tylenol 2, 3 and 4); oxycodone (Percocet, Oxycocet, Percodan, OxyNeo—which has replaced OxyContin); hydromorphone (Dilaudid); morphine (MS Contin, Doloral, Statex, M.O.S.); meperidine (Demerol); pentazocine (Talwin); tramadol (Ultram); fentanyl (Abstral, Duragesic patch).

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

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. In Canada, fentanyl is sometimes prescribed for long-term relief of very severe pain after a patient has tried multiple other opioids. 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 marketed 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.

How common is prescription opioid misuse?

Many educators do not realize the extent and impact of prescription opioid misuse (use without a prescription) among youth. In recent years, prescription opioids used non-medicinally have replaced tobacco as the fourth most commonly used drug among Ontario teens (at about 10%), behind alcohol, marijuana and e-cigarettes. According to results from the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health's 2015 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey (OSDUHS), younger students, particularly those 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 medication without a prescription in the last year.

Many young people think that because opioid painkillers are prescribed medications, using these drugs is not as dangerous as using drugs such as 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 even be life-threatening.

What should I be concerned about for students misusing opioids?

Misusing opioids can be harmful for a variety of reasons:

- **Opioids can be addictive.** This may include physical dependence, where over time a person's body gets used to the drug and develops tolerance to some of its effects. This means that the person needs to take more and more to get the same feeling. As the amount taken increases, so does the risk of overdose.
- **Withdrawal can create negative cycles.** Teens who are dependent on opioids may experience withdrawal if they suddenly stop using the drug. The symptoms of withdrawal include intense restlessness, muscle and bone pain, insomnia, diarrhea, vomiting and cold flashes. The experience of withdrawal can lead to depression and suicidal feelings.
- **Crushing slow-release products can increase the risk of overdose.** Time-released prescription painkillers that are designed to deliver pain-relieving medication slowly over several hours are sometimes crushed and snorted or injected. Unfortunately, crushing slow-release products causes the drug to enter the system all at once, sometimes resulting in an overdose. With an overdose, breathing slows down and eventually stops, and death may occur.
- **Using opioids with other substances can increase the risk of overdose.** When opioids are combined with alcohol or other depressant drugs (such as anti-anxiety or sleeping pills (benzodiazepines, Xanax, valium, lorazepam), graval, ketamine, or GHB), the risk of overdose increases.
- **Risky Behaviors.** Opioids can impair decision-making and may result in risky behaviors that increase the chances of young people being injured or killed (e.g., fighting, impaired driving, or suicidal behavior).

How do young people get access to prescription opioids?

Most young people report that they access opioids from home. Specifically, in the OSDUHS survey, 59% of students 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 found in fake prescription pain medication or other drugs.



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

Are there risks even if a young person is prescribed an opioid?

Yes. Prescription opioids are very strong medications and without careful monitoring, could lead to addiction. Opioids may be prescribed for pain control when other medications have not provided relief. However, careful monitoring by a health professional is essential.

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.



What can I do about prescription opioid misuse in schools?

For all students:

- Share factual information about the risks of misusing prescription opioids or of using illegal opioids.
- Look for opportunities to reinforce this information as part of regular instruction (e.g., health and physical education, chemistry/biology, etc.).
- Be aware of your own biases about substance use and misuse.
- Be open to conversation about opioid misuse with all students – it may be difficult to detect when students are developing a substance misuse problem.
- Watch students for signs of a substance use problem.
- Review this info-sheet or other evidence-based resources so that you can be prepared with knowledge in case students need your support.

For students at risk:

- If a student is showing signs of a problem, approach the student to share what you have noticed and open the conversation.
- Listen and support, with compassion, and without judgement.
- Be aware of the potential harm of “scare” tactics.
- Provide the student with accurate, factual information about prescription opioid misuse.
- Avoid offering anecdotal evidence or personal opinion.
- Discuss the importance of getting help, including talking with parents/guardians.
- Become familiar with your school and board resources for supporting students who appear to be struggling with substance misuse, and with procedures for dealing with students who appear to be intoxicated or under the influence of substances.
- Work with your school team and parents to determine ways to best support the student. This may include accessing board supports or appropriate community resources.
- Seek direction from your school leadership team if you have questions about what to do.

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.

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

What is Naloxone?

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.

Where can I get help?

- For more information and student mental health resources, consult with your school leadership team. Some boards will have school mental health professionals that serve schools, and others will rely on community professional supports. Every school board has a Mental Health Leader who provides leadership and coordination related to school mental health and well-being, including supports related to substance misuse.
- For more information about options in your community, contact ConnexOntario's Drug & Alcohol Helpline at 1 800 565-8603 or www.connexontario.ca or www.drugandalcoholhelpline.ca
- If your students are looking for looking for individual support resources, you may wish to provide the contact information for Kids Help Phone: 1 800 668-6868, www.kidshelpphone.ca
- For more information about opioid misuse in the province contact Public Health Ontario at www.publichealthontario.ca

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



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