

Drug overdose

A drug overdose means taking more of one medicine or drug, or combining more medicines or drugs, than your body can safely handle. Many medicines and drugs can cause harm if used wrongly. This includes prescription medicines, non-prescription medicines, herbal or natural remedies, alcohol and illegal drugs.

The main medicines and drugs involved in overdoses are central nervous system depressants, stimulants and hallucinogens. Drugs can affect the body in many ways and can fall into more than one category.

Depressant drugs

Depressants slow down the messages between the brain and the body. They include:

- heroin (smack, H)
- opioids (e.g. oxycodone, morphine, codeine, methadone)
- cannabis (marijuana, pot, dope)
- GHB (fantasy)
- solvents and inhalants (glue)
- ketamine (K, special K)
- benzodiazepines (benzos – e.g. flunitrazepam, diazepam, oxazepam)
- alcohol (booze, grog).



Stimulant drugs

Stimulants speed up the messages between the brain and the body. They include:

- amphetamines (speed, ice, crystal, shabu)
- cocaine (coke, crack)
- MDMA (ecstasy, E, XTC, eckies)
- slimming tablets (e.g. *Duromine*)
- caffeine (e.g. coffee, tea, cola, energy drinks)
- nicotine (e.g. cigarettes).

Hallucinogen drugs

Hallucinogens affect a person's view of reality. They include:

- ketamine (K, special K)
- LSD (trips, acid, microdots)
- cannabis (marijuana, pot, dope).

Who is at risk of overdose?

An accidental overdose can occur with both illegal drugs and prescription medicines such as strong pain killers. There is no safe level of illegal drug use as it is hard to be sure of the quality and the strength of the product being used.

An overdose can happen to an experienced drug user and to an inexperienced user. In most cases of fatal overdose with a drug such as heroin, other drugs are found in the person's blood stream as well. While too much of one drug can cause death, the effects of a mixture of drugs (a drug 'cocktail') can be just as dangerous and unpredictable.

The same drug can affect different people in different ways, depending on:

- the tolerance of the user – how sensitive their body is to the drug and how often they've been using
- the physical and emotional condition of the user
- the quantity of the drug taken
- the mix of drugs used
- the way the drugs are used (e.g. injected, swallowed or inhaled).

Treating heroin/opioid overdose

If a person has overdosed with heroin or other opioids (e.g. oxycodone, morphine), naloxone can reverse the effects of the opioid within 2–3 minutes. It is important that you also call an ambulance (000) as once the naloxone wears off (about 30–90 minutes) it is possible to slip back into the overdose condition.

Naloxone is available without a prescription after consultation with your pharmacist. It can be administered as an injection or as a nasal spray. If you are at risk of an overdose caused by an opioid you should consider having naloxone at home, to start reversing the effects of an overdose, even before an ambulance arrives. Ask your pharmacist for advice.

Self care and caring for others

For safety, use only legally made and distributed medicines and drugs. Use the medicines and drugs only as directed and prescribed. If you choose to use drugs in other ways:

- Do not combine drugs or combine drugs with alcohol as this increases the risk of overdose.
- Try a small dose first to test the drug strength and its effect on you.
- Try to have other people around when you use, so help is near if needed. Tell someone what you are using.
- If you are injecting for the first time or have not injected for a while, use a lower dose.
- Always inject slowly.
- Don't share injecting equipment.
- Some drugs (e.g. ecstasy) can raise body temperature. If you are dancing or in a hot or crowded area, have cool-down breaks and sip water slowly and safely.
- Learn first aid skills (e.g. resuscitation). Others may need your help.
- Join an insurance fund to cover ambulance costs. Some people with Centrelink and Dept. of Veterans Affairs (DVA) concession cards are eligible for free emergency ambulance services.
- Call an ambulance immediately if you suspect somebody who has used drugs may have overdosed, is unwell or can not be woken.

Note: Police do not automatically come when an ambulance is called.



For more information

Ambulance service Emergency

Phone: 000

Mobile phone: 000 (or 112 if mobile is blocked or has no network coverage)

Lifeline

Phone: 13 11 14 (24 hours crisis support)

Website: www.lifeline.org.au

Alcohol and Drug Information Services (ADIS)

www.health.gov.au/health-topics/drugs

National Alcohol and Other Drug Hotline:

Phone: 1800 250 015

NSW 02 9361 8000 (Sydney)
1800 422 599 (NSW Country)

QLD 1800 177 833

WA 08 9442 5000 (Perth)
1800 198 024 (WA country)

NT 08 8922 8399 (Darwin)
08 8951 7580 (Alice Springs)
1800 131 350 (Territory wide)

SA 1300 131 340

TAS 1800 811 994

VIC 1800 888 236

ACT 02 6207 9977

Alcohol and Drug Foundation

www.adf.org.au

Australian Injecting & Illicit Drug Users League (AIVL) Handy Hints Information Handbook

Phone: 02 6279 1600

Website: www.aivl.org.au

Carers Australia

Phone: 02 6122 9900

Website: www.carersaustralia.com.au

Young Carers

Phone: 1800 242 636

Website: www.youngcarersnetwork.com.au

Commonwealth Respite and Carelink Centres

Phone: 1800 052 222

For emergency respite support

Phone: 1800 059 059

Website: www.dss.gov.au/disability-and-carers/carers

Australian Government: Services Australia (Carers)

Phone: 132 717

Website: www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/individuals/carers

The Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS)

Phone: 13 14 50

Website: www.tisnational.gov.au

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: www.healthdirect.gov.au

NPS MedicineWise

Medicines Line

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: www.nps.org.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.

Related Fact Cards

- » *First aid in the home*
- » *Methadone and buprenorphine*
- » *Safer injecting practices*

Your Self Care Pharmacy:

The Pharmaceutical Society of Australia is committed to providing current and reliable health information.

This card was current at the time of publication.

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