

# Understanding opioids.

1800 700 514 (Freecall)  
[unitingvictas.org.au/aod](http://unitingvictas.org.au/aod)

## What are opioids?

The term 'opioids' refers to substances derived from the opium poppy. They are often used for pain relief, both short and long-term. However, use of opioids carries risk. Some opioids are prescribed, such as codeine or morphine for pain relief. Prescription opioids - such as fentanyl - are heavily regulated and may be used to numb sensation during medical procedures. Other opioids - such as heroin - can be obtained illicitly. Opioids are a depressant, meaning they slow down the functioning of the central nervous system.

### Common effects include:

- Short-term physical and emotional relief from pain
- Feeling relaxed
- Pleasure and euphoria

### Negative effects include:

- Lowered heart rate
- Slower breathing
- Lowered blood pressure
- Poor coordination
- Confusion
- Nausea and vomiting
- Drowsiness and 'nodding off'
- High risk of overdose

Tolerance to opioids can form quickly, even if they're prescribed. This means you might find yourself needing more of the drug to get the same effect. Some people might change from prescribed opioids to illicit ones, which can differ in quality and increase the likelihood of overdose.

## Mixing substances

Mixing any two depressants (such as alcohol, benzos and opioids) will increase their effects. This includes mixing two opioids together, or using other sedative medication. The side-effects will worsen and can last longer than expected.

## Injecting

This is the most risky way to use opioids, as the effects are felt faster and stronger. The risk of infections and overdose increases significantly. Veins can suffer lasting damage if the same veins are used repeatedly.

## Reducing risks

If you're injecting, avoid sharing or reusing equipment to reduce risk of infection. Needle and Syringe Programs (NSPs) provide sterile equipment and can help you to access support. Also avoid using alone, so that someone can respond if you overdose.

## Overdose awareness

Not all overdoses are fatal, however there may be complications that increase the risk. If you see someone who you suspect has overdosed, there are ways of managing or even reversing it:

- Call 000 immediately and tell the operator what you believe the person has taken
- Put them in the recovery position (if trained in First Aid)
- Administer Naloxone (if trained)

## Signs of overdose:

- Slipping in and out of consciousness
- Falling unconscious and unresponsive
- Shallow breathing
- Weak pulse
- Gurgling or snoring noises
- Lips or face becoming pale or blue

# The future is bright.



## Understanding the risks of withdrawal

It's not recommended to stop using an opioid without medical advice. Often opioids mask feelings of pain and trauma, which can return strongly. A medical professional should offer transfer to opioid replacement therapy (ORT) to support withdrawal.

### Someone going without use of opioids for a couple of days is likely to experience:

- Sweating
- Hot and cold flushes
- Headaches
- Diarrhoea
- Flu-like symptoms
- Poor sleep
- Pain in back, limbs and stomach
- Feeling agitated and irritated.

If you do resume using opioids, even after just a few days without, use a smaller amount than normal as your tolerance will have reduced, and your risk of overdose therefore increases.

### ORT or pharmacotherapy

Opioid-based medications available through AOD services and health professionals are longer-acting and have fewer side-effects. They help to reduce cravings and control use. They include:

- Methadone (sedating effects)
- Suboxone (partial blocker)
- Naltrexone (full blocker)
- Depot buprenorphine (single injections that last 2-4 weeks)

To find out more about ORT, or to ask about Naloxone for overdose reversal, speak to an alcohol and other drugs worker or medical professional.

## Contacts

If you want to talk to someone about your own or someone else's alcohol or other drug use, you can get more information from these Victorian and Tasmanian state-wide services. If you are located in another state, these contacts will direct you to your local support services:

### DirectLine

24/7 service offering counselling, information and referrals.

**T** 1800 888 236

[directline.org.au](http://directline.org.au)

### Harm Reduction Victoria

Support and information from other drug using peers.

**T** 03 9329 1500

[hrvic.org.au](http://hrvic.org.au)

### QUIT

**T** 13 78 48

[quit.org.au](http://quit.org.au)

### Family Drug and Gambling Help

Victorian support for family members.

**T** 1300 660 068

[sharc.org.au/sharc-programs/family-drug-gambling-help](http://sharc.org.au/sharc-programs/family-drug-gambling-help)

### Drug alerts

[health.vic.gov.au/alcohol-and-drugs/drug-alerts](http://health.vic.gov.au/alcohol-and-drugs/drug-alerts)

### Alcohol Tobacco and Other Drugs Tasmania Service Directory

[atdc.org.au/service-directory](http://atdc.org.au/service-directory)

### Alcohol and Drug Information Service TAS

24/7 service offering counselling, information and referrals.

**T** 1800 811 994

Uniting would like to thank consumer partners for drawing on their lived experience to contribute to this series of publications.

