

Risk Reduction and Overdose Prevention in Opioid Prescribing

Opioids cause more than 100 overdose deaths a day in the United States. Many of these are unintentional. Providers should consider and screen for potentially harmful behaviors that put patients, and their families, at risk of overdose. Potentially harmful behaviors include:



A high-volume use of opioids



Taking opioids in combination with alcohol, benzodiazepines, or other respiratory depressants



Using illicit opioids or other illicit drugs

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) recommends that providers offer education that can reduce the risk for overdose and consider a naloxone prescription in certain situations.

Risk reduction education from a provider may include information about safe storage and disposal of opioids, as well as a review of which other medications a patient is taking that are respiratory depressants (including benzodiazepines, some anti-seizure, and many psychiatric medications), in addition to letting patients know that mixing opioids with other respiratory depressants or taking more opioids than prescribed may increase their risk of overdose.

Naloxone is a life-saving opioid overdose reversal medication. Providers should prescribe naloxone in certain situations. Naloxone distribution has not been shown to increase drug misuse but rather has been associated with an increase in treatment engagement. SAMHSA advises providers to encourage at-risk patients to create an “overdose plan” to share with friends, family, and/or caregivers. A plan should include information on the signs of overdose and how to administer naloxone. At-risk patients include individuals:



Who are taking higher dosages of opioids (>50 MME/day)



With a history of overdose



With a history of substance use disorder



Who are taking benzodiazepines with opioids



Who are at risk for returning to a high opioid dose to which they are no longer tolerant (e.g., individuals recently released from prison, patients leaving detoxification facilities).