

Staying Safe on Prescription Opioids

Together We Can. 

*Suicide Prevention Information for Veterans,
Their Families, and Caregivers*

Understanding Opioid Use

Opioids are drugs a doctor might prescribe for pain relief. For example, your doctor might give you a medication with codeine, hydrocodone, morphine, or oxycodone to relieve pain from an injury or after a surgery. Some brand names for these medications include OxyContin, Percocet, and Vicodin. But there are many more.

Opioids are highly addictive. This means you could lose control over your use of them and feel sick without them. That's why they should only be taken under the care and guidance of a medical professional. Opioid misuse can lead to both addiction and overdose.

An opioid overdose is when a person takes more than the body can handle. It causes difficulty breathing and can result in suffocation and death. Overdose is especially likely with the use of heroin, fentanyl, and other illegal opioids obtainable on the street or online. These are often sold in powder form, but sellers may also claim they are prescription opioid pills or other substances. Fentanyl and carfentanil are so dangerous just touching or accidentally inhaling them can cause overdose and death. Street names for fentanyl and carfentanil include Apache, China Girl, China White, Dance Fever, Friend, Goodfella, Gray Death, Jackpot, Murder 8, TNT, and Tango and Cash.

Using opioids with alcohol, anxiety or sleep medications, and some antidepressants can increase overdose risk.

In addition to risking an accidental overdose, people may use opioids to attempt suicide. People who misuse opioids are at increased risk for suicide by any means, not just by overdose. Experts have observed that people who have been on prescription opioids for a long time, or at high doses, may be at increased risk for suicide, especially in the weeks after stopping opioid treatment or decreasing their dose. People may also be at higher risk for overdose or suicide in the weeks after starting opioid treatment.

How to Stay Safe on Prescription Opioids

You can do several things to protect yourself and others from the risks associated with prescription opioids:

- Before you are prescribed opioids, tell your health care provider about all other medications and supplements you are taking.
- Tell your health care provider if you or your family has a history of alcohol or drug addiction. There are other pain treatment options that are equally as effective as (or more effective than) opioids and don't carry the same risks for addiction and overdose.
- Only take opioids prescribed to you and as directed by your health care provider. Never accept opioids from anyone else.
- Don't share your medications with others, because they may cause harm to someone else.
- Store prescription opioids in a locked container and out of children's reach. Safely dispose of any unused medication when you're done. Learn more at www.pbm.va.gov/PBM/vacenterformedicationsafety/vacenterformedicationsafetyprescriptionsafety.asp.
- If you've been prescribed opioids, talk to your health care provider about your risk for overdose. Tell your health care provider if you experience changes in your mood, balance, sleep, or pain level, and if you find it difficult to stop or decrease opioid use.
- Discuss with your health care provider alternative ways to manage your pain. VHA Pain Management provides online tools and information for Veterans and the public on living with chronic pain: www.va.gov/PAINMANAGEMENT/Veteran_Public.
- For more information, go to VA's opioid safety education tool at www.va.gov/PAINMANAGEMENT/Opioid_Safety/Patient_Education.asp.

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In Case of an Overdose

The drug naloxone (brand names NARCAN and EVZIO) can reverse an opioid overdose if administered in time. Naloxone is available without a copay to Veterans at risk for opioid overdose. For more information about opioid overdose education, visit www.pbm.va.gov/PBM/academicdetailingservice/Opioid_Overdose_Education_and_Naloxone_Distribution.asp.

As in any emergency, if you suspect you or someone you know is experiencing an opioid overdose, call 911 immediately.

Be There for a Veteran in Your Life

You don't need special training to **Be There** for someone who may be in crisis. Everyone can play a role in preventing Veteran suicide. Approaching the subject may seem difficult, but it is crucial to start the conversation. For more information, visit BeThereForVeterans.com.



Know the Signs

Signs of a suicidal crisis may vary for each person but could include changes in mood and activities, an increase in alcohol or drug use, expressions of hopelessness, agitation, or withdrawal from others. If you notice these behaviors, **Be There** for the person in need.



Ask the Question

VA, in collaboration with PsychArmor Institute (psycharmor.org), developed the S.A.V.E. online training video, which describes how you can act with care and compassion if you encounter a Veteran who is in suicidal crisis.

S – Recognize the **signs** of suicidal thinking.

A – **Ask** the question: Are you thinking of ending your life?

V – **Validate** the Veteran's experience.

E – **Encourage** treatment and **expedite** getting help.

Access the S.A.V.E. training on BeThereForVeterans.com.



Get Immediate Help



Veterans who are in crisis or having thoughts of suicide, and those who know a Veteran in crisis, should contact the Veterans Crisis Line for confidential support available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year:

- Call **1-800-273-8255** and Press **1**.
- Send a text message to **838255**.
- Chat online VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat.

For more ways to find help, visit VeteransCrisisLine.net/Get-Help/Local-Resources.

Resources for Veterans, Families, Friends, and Caregivers

- **VA Caregiver Support** can connect you with a local Caregiver Support Coordinator and offer additional resources. Visit www.caregiver.va.gov or call 855-260-3274.
- **Make The Connection** connects Veterans, their families and friends, and other supporters with information and solutions to issues affecting their lives. Visit MakeTheConnection.net.
- **Coaching Into Care** educates, supports, and empowers family members and friends who are seeking care or services for a Veteran. Call 888-823-7458 or visit www.mirecc.va.gov/coaching.
- **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration** provides free and confidential treatment referral services about mental and/or substance use disorders, prevention, and recovery 24/7. Call 800-662-HELP (4357) or visit www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline.