

Opioids 101

What you need to know to support youth

In 2023 and again in 2025, opioids were identified as the second most used substance by Peel Youth. Opioids belong to a category of substances known as Central Nervous System (CNS) depressants. They slow down the parts of the brain that control vital functions such as breathing and heart rate. While mainly prescribed to help relieve pain, they can produce euphoria (feeling high), making them prone to use for non-medical purposes.

Types of opioids

- **Natural:** Made from the poppy plant (e.g., morphine, codeine).
- **Semi-synthetic:** Natural opioids modified in a lab (e.g., heroin, oxycodone).
- **Synthetic:** Made in a lab with no natural ingredients (e.g., fentanyl, methadone).

Legal vs. illegal access

- **Legal:** Prescribed medication with highly controlled ingredients.
- **Illegal ("Street drugs"):** Strength and ingredients are unknown. Often mixed with fentanyl, benzodiazepines, or xylazine.



Health effects

How rapidly opioids produce the desired effects (pain relief, euphoria) varies depending on how opioids are taken.

Orally: The effects are gradual and usually felt in about 10 to 20 minutes.



Injected into a vein: Effects are most intense and felt within one minute.



For many opioids, a single dose can provide pain relief for 4-5 hours.



Short term effects

- Drowsiness and relaxation
- Euphoria (feeling high)
- Difficulty concentrating and confusion
- Nausea and vomiting
- Difficulty breathing
- Headaches/dizziness



Long term effects

- Increased tolerance
- Dependence
- Substance or opioid use disorder
- Liver damage
- Infertility
- Worsening pain (known as "opioid-induced hyperalgesia")

Emergency response: Overdose

Effects differ for everyone and depend on factors like gender, age, and food intake.



Signs of an overdose:

- Difficulty staying awake
- Unable to walk or talk clearly
- Breathing slowly, breathing loudly or not at all
- Not responding to noise or shaking of shoulders
- Pale or bluish skin (check lips, nails) and they feel cold
- Tiny pupils (pinpoint) or their eyes are rolled back
- Vomiting



Naloxone use

- Naloxone temporarily reverses an opioid overdose
- It is safe to use – if you aren't sure what was taken, it will not harm the person
- Available as nasal spray or injectable
- Call 911 if you suspect an overdose

References:

[Health Status Data- Summary of Student Substance Use-Peel Public Health](#)
[Prescription Opioids | CAMH](#)
[Educators Guide | Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction](#)
[Opioids - Canada.ca](#)
[Naloxone - Canada.ca](#)

Looking for more support with substance use education for students?

Visit peelregion.ca/business/teachers-educators/healthy-schools/substance-use-prevention-resources or connect with your School Health Nurse.

