



DRUG OVERDOSE

A drug overdose can occur when more of a drug (or a combination of drugs) is taken than the body can safely handle. While this can happen with some prescription and over the counter medicines, the illegal drugs pose the biggest risk as you have no way of knowing their quality or strength. Read the information on this card to learn more about the drugs most commonly involved with overdose, and how overdose can be avoided and managed.

The two main types of drugs involved in overdose are depressant drugs and stimulant drugs.

Depressant drugs - reduce activity in the nervous system examples include:

- heroin
- morphine
- methadone
- sleeping pills
- benzodiazepines e.g. *Valium®*, *Serepax®*, *alcohol*.

An overdose of a depressant drug slows the nervous system down to a dangerous level. This can stop a person's breathing.

Stimulant drugs - speed up the nervous system examples include:

- amphetamines
- 'designer drugs' (e.g. *ecstasy*)
- caffeine
- nicotine.

An overdose of a stimulant drug speeds up the body, sometimes to a dangerous level. This can cause high blood pressure, a rapid heart rate and increased body temperature.

IMPORTANT

If a drug overdose has been taken or you suspect someone has taken an overdose

- try to stay calm
- dial 000 and tell them you need the ambulance service
- tell the ambulance service where the person is
- tell the ambulance operator the person's condition - are they breathing? Do they have a pulse? This will determine priority.
- tell the operator a drug overdose has occurred

Who's at risk of overdose?

An overdose can happen just as easily to an experienced drug user or an inexperienced user. In most cases of fatal overdose with drugs such as heroin, other drugs are found in the blood stream at the same time. While too much heroin can cause death, a mixture of drugs (a drug 'cocktail') is often more dangerous and its effects are unpredictable.

How a drug affects one person may be different to how it affects someone else. It can depend upon:

- the tolerance of the user i.e. how sensitive their body is to the drug, and how often they've been using
- the quantity of the drug taken
- the mix of drugs i.e. what other drugs they have taken which would still be in their system
- the way the drugs are taken e.g. injected, swallowed or inhaled.

Treating heroin/opiate overdose

If a person has overdosed with heroin or other opiates, the drug *Narcan®* can reverse the effects of the drug immediately. Once the

- tell the operator if you know what drugs have been taken and if possible how many
- stay with the person until an ambulance arrives. You may have valuable information for the ambulance officers which could save time. This could be the difference between life and death.

If you are worried someone might have overdosed, but you don't think they need an ambulance, watch them very closely and check on them every few minutes. Call an ambulance if you have any concerns.

Narcan® wears off, it is possible to slip back to the original overdose condition, especially if heroin is used again soon after.

Narcan® is the brand name for naloxone.

Self care and caring for others

The best way to prevent a drug overdose is to take only legally manufactured and distributed drugs, as directed and/or prescribed.

- Avoid drug cocktails.
- Purchase from the same supplier.
- Try small or 'short' tastes first to check the strength of the drug.
- Use in a secure place or with other people so that help is near if needed.
- If you are injecting for the first time or have had a break from injecting, always use a lower dose.
- If you take stimulant drugs such as 'ecstasy' and are dancing, don't drink too much too quickly (this has proven fatal in the past due to rapid dilution of the blood). It is best to sip drinks slowly and regularly.
- Learn relevant first aid skills e.g., Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation (CPR). This may help if others overdose in your company.
- If somebody who has used drugs is asleep and you can't wake them up, they may have overdosed and their life may be in danger - dial 000.
- If a person is unconscious but still has a pulse and is breathing, roll them onto their side - dial 000.
- If a person is not breathing but they have a pulse, check their airway, and when this is clear, give them mouth-to-mouth resuscitation - get somebody else to dial 000.
- If a person is not breathing and has no pulse, start CPR - get somebody else to dial 000.
- If you have overdosed you are strongly advised to talk to a counsellor or doctor.

Some States have Overdose Response Support Workers who are there to listen and assist you.

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

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Pharmacy Self Care has a strong commitment to providing current and reliable health information.
The information in this card was current at time of printing.

WARNING!

The following will not help to stop or reverse the effects when a person has taken a drug overdose:

- putting them under a shower
- injecting them with salty water or speed
- walking them around
- making them vomit
- slapping or yelling at them

These actions can be dangerous and should not be attempted.

Remember - Check with your State/Territory user organisation so you know what the laws and procedures are in your State regarding police attendance. Even if you live in a State where the police are called, a person's life may be at stake - the worst thing that can happen is that someone dies.

Other relevant Fact Cards

- *Safer Injecting Practices*
- *Methadone*

Contact numbers

Your doctor - listed under Medical Practitioners in the yellow pages of the phone book

Ambulance Service ph 000

St John Ambulance under 's' in the white pages of the phone book.

Further information and counselling contact your Alcohol and Drug Service in your state:

Direct

NSW	(02) 9361 8000	1800 422 599
VIC	(03) 9416 1818	1800 136 385
QLD	(07) 3236 2414	1800 117 833
WA	(09) 9442 5000	1800 198 024
TAS	(03) 6228 2880	1800 811 994
NT	(08) 89 818 030	1800 629 683
SA	1 300 131 340 (statewide)	
ACT	(02) 6205 4545 (territory wide)	

Country free call

Your Self Care pharmacist. To find: (02) 6283 4777.

Poisons Information Centre on 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.

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

93-23449-000723