



WHO WE ARE



STUDY GUIDE

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Who We Are

In the United States, at least 91 people die every day from an opioid overdose. The ripples of these deaths linger in the memories of those who survive and those who they leave behind. *Who We Are* takes us on an immersive journey that provides an intimate and meditative portrait of life, loss, and hope through the eyes of families confronting the opioid epidemic.

What Are Opioids?

Opioids are chemicals that interact with nerve receptors in the brain, spinal cord, and other parts of the body. They are sometimes referred to as narcotics. Opioids block pain messages from travelling from the body to the brain, and this means that they are very effective at relieving pain. As a result, doctors prescribe them for the relief of severe or chronic pain. In addition to relieving pain, opioids can also create a feeling of happiness or euphoria, and for this reason, they are commonly misused. Whether they are taken recreationally or for pain, opioids can be very addictive.

Opioids naturally occur in the opium poppy, and can also be synthesized in a laboratory. While the term “opioid” is commonly used to refer to both natural and synthetic opioids, natural opioids are also referred to as opiates. Opiates include morphine and codeine. Some opioids are semi-synthetic, meaning that they are created in a laboratory, but they are made from natural opiates. These include hydrocodone, and oxycodone. Heroin is also a semi-synthetic opioid, and is made from morphine. Finally, other opioids, such as fentanyl and tramadol, are completely synthetic. There are a number of legal, prescription opioids including morphine and oxycodone. Heroin is an illegal opioid. People take opioids in numerous ways including in pills, skin patches, suppositories, nasal sprays, or by injection.

Misuse and Addiction

While many people take opioids according to a doctor’s prescription, a large number of people also misuse these drugs. Misuse means using them in any way that was not directed by a doctor, including taking more than prescribed, and using them without a prescription. According to the 2019 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, in 2019, 3.7 percent of people 12 and older in the United States had misused opioids in the past year. That is 10.1 million people. The majority misused prescription pain relievers. 745,000 used heroin.¹ Common reasons for misuse include wanting to feel good, for stress relief, and to help with sleep. Regular use of opioids—whether by prescription or not—can lead to dependence and addiction. The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) says that among people prescribed opioids for chronic pain, 21 to 29 percent misuse the drugs, and 8 to 12 percent develop an opioid use disorder. Addiction can happen quickly. The Mayo Clinic advises that these drugs

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<https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/reports/rpt29393/2019NSDUHFRPDFWHTML/2019NSDUHFR1PDFW090120.pdf>

are not a safe long-term medical treatment option, and are safest when only used for three days or less.² Researchers have found that people who take a higher dose of opioids or who use them for an extended period of time may be more likely to misuse them or develop an addiction. Certain genetic or environmental factors are also believed to increase the chance of misuse or addiction, including a personal or family history of drug or alcohol abuse, and a mental health disorder.

Opioid use can also lead to overdose. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in 2019, the majority of U.S. drug overdose deaths involved an opioid and most of those were synthetic opioids. The agency reports that opioid-involved death rates increased 6 percent between 2018 and 2019. For synthetic opioids (not including methadone), the increase was 15 percent.³ Overall, The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) reports that almost 50,000 people died from opioid-involved overdoses in 2019.

The authors of a 2020 Brookings Institution report point out that the effects of opioids go far beyond addiction and overdose though. They explain that dependence can increase the risk of suicide and depression, and of contracting an infectious disease. It can also make it difficult for people to have good family relationships or to be productive members of society, and can increase their chances of imprisonment or criminal prosecution.⁴

Opioid addiction is often treated with a combination of medication and therapy. Addiction medications include methadone and naltrexone. Since opiates are so addictive, a significant percentage of people relapse. Researchers have found that for heroin in particular, relapse rates are high.

About Heroin

In addition to misuse and addiction, prescription opioid use can also lead to heroin use. NIDA reports that 4 to 6 percent of people who misuse opioids go on to use heroin. Of those people using heroin, it estimates that 80 percent misused prescription opioids first. Heroin is an illegal and highly addictive drug made from morphine. It can be injected, snorted, or smoked. Heroin users report that the drug gives them an intense rush of pleasure, and that the effects of the drug can last for several hours. However, heroin use can also cause a number of negative health effects including lung problems, constipation, brain changes, and insomnia. Regular heroin use leads to tolerance, where more and more of the drug is required to produce the same effects. It also leads to physical dependence, meaning that stopping leads to withdrawal symptoms such as muscle and bone pain, vomiting, cold flashes, and uncontrollable leg movements. According to the CDC, almost 40 people die every day in the United States from a heroin overdose.⁵

² <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/prescription-drug-abuse/in-depth/how-opioid-addiction-occurs/art-20360372>

³ <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/epidemic/index.html>

⁴ https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/0_Overview.pdf

⁵ <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/opioids/index.html>

About Fentanyl

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that is up to a hundred times stronger than morphine. It is prescribed for severe pain. In addition to being sold as a prescription drug, fentanyl is made and sold illegally. Sometimes it is mixed with other illegal drugs such as heroin, in many cases without the users' knowledge, which can result in an overdose. Fentanyl overdoses have increased in the United States in recent years. The CDC reports that in 2019, overdoses from synthetic opioids—mainly fentanyl—were twelve times higher than in 2013, at a total of more than 36,000 people.⁶ Most of the fentanyl sold illegally in the United States comes from China.

A Public Health Emergency

Misuse of opioids and opioid addiction are both major problems in the United States. In 2017, the U.S. government declared the opioid crisis to be a public health emergency. NIDA explains how the opioid crisis came to be. It says, "In the late 1990s, pharmaceutical companies reassured the medical community that patients would not become addicted to prescription opioid pain relievers, and healthcare providers began to prescribe them at greater rates. This subsequently led to widespread diversion and misuse of these medications before it became clear that these medications could indeed be highly addictive."⁷ Over-prescription and subsequent misuse has led to a public health crisis, it says, which includes widespread abuse and overdoses of opioids, withdrawal symptoms in newborn babies as a result of use during pregnancy, and an increase in HIV and other infectious diseases that has occurred with an increase in drug injection.

According to the CDC, there have been three waves of overdose deaths in the opioid crisis. It says that the first wave started with the over-prescription of opioids in the 1990s. The second involves heroin overdose deaths and started in 2010. The third is related to overdoses of synthetic opioids, particularly fentanyl, and began in 2013.⁸

Reducing the Problem

U.S. public health agencies have been working to reduce the problem. The CDC reports that while opioid prescriptions increased between 2006 and 2012, since then they have decreased. In 2019, there were 46.7 prescriptions per 100 people. However, the agency cautions that prescription rates are still very high in some parts of the country. For instance, it says that in 2019, 5 percent of counties had a prescription rate so high that it was enough for every person there to have a prescription.

NIDA reports that U.S. overdose deaths involving prescription opioids fell between 2017 and 2019. Heroin overdose deaths have also fallen since 2016. However, the total numbers remain

⁶ <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/opioids/fentanyl.html>

⁷ <https://www.drugabuse.gov/drug-topics/opioids/opioid-overdose-crisis>

⁸ <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/epidemic/index.html>

substantial. In addition, in December 2020, the CDC reported that drug overdoses had increased significantly during the coronavirus pandemic. It says that in the 12 months ending May 2020, the United States had 81,000 deaths from drug overdoses, which is the highest number of overdose deaths that has ever been recorded during a 12-month period of time. According to the CDC, this increase has been driven mainly by the fentanyl.

Additional Resources

Books

- Beth Macy (2018). *Dopesick: Dealers, Doctors, and the Drug Company that Addicted America*. New York: Little Brown and Company.
- John McMillan, ed. (2019). *American Epidemic: Reporting from the Front Lines of the Opioid Crisis*. New York: The New Press.
- Yngvild Olsen (2019). *The Opioid Epidemic: What Everyone Needs to Know*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ben Westhoff (2019). *Fentanyl, Inc.: How Rogue Chemists Are Creating the Deadliest Wave of the Opioid Epidemic*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press.

Online Sources

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021). "Opioid Basics." <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/opioids/index.html>
- Vanda Felbab-Brown, et. al. (June 22, 2020). "The Opioid Crisis in America: Domestic and International Dimensions," *Brookings Institution*. <https://www.brookings.edu/multi-chapter-report/the-opioid-crisis-in-america-domestic-and-international-dimensions/>
- Claire Felter (July 16, 2020). "Backgrounder: The U.S. Opioid Epidemic," *Council on Foreign Relations*, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-opioid-epidemic>
- Johns Hopkins Medicine (no date). "Opioid Addiction." <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/opioids/>
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