

# A PRIMER ON OPIOIDS

FACTS ABOUT THE NATIONAL CRISIS & WAYS HEALTH EDUCATION PREVENTS ADDICTION AND IMPROVES LIFE

Opioid refers broadly to a class of chemicals that inhibit pain receptors in the brain, spinal cord, and digestive tract that function to reduce the effects of pain. This includes heroin (a highly addictive, illegal substance), fentanyl, hydrocodone (e.g., Vicodin®), oxycodone (e.g., OxyContin®, Percocet®), methadone and morphine.<sup>1-2</sup> Opioids provide a feeling of euphoria making them increasingly addictive. Repeated administration may lead to opioid tolerance due to decreased drug potency, in which a higher dose is needed to achieve the same effects.<sup>3</sup>

## Health educators teach people about behaviors that promote wellness.

Health educators offer knowledge, skills and training that complement those of clinical health care providers, community health workers, policymakers, community advocates and many other professionals whose work impacts human health.<sup>4</sup>

## Opioid use, misuse, and use disorders

Opioids have long been employed by the pharmaceutical industry for their effect on pain. However, opioid prescribing practices shifted to begin treating chronic pain within the past 40 years.<sup>5</sup> Now, the magnitude of this public health crisis is marked by the following:

- **Doctors are prescribing opioids more often**, for a longer duration and at higher doses than ever before, leaving patients feeling misled. Increased medications lead to misuse of opioids and combined drugs.<sup>1, 6</sup>
- **Opioid use disorder (OUD)**, in which individuals become addicted to opioids, may result in related overdose death. Opioid misuse occurs due to pain, injury, trauma, despair, and age.<sup>2</sup> High tolerance makes it difficult to abstain from use, thus many continue to use opioids while experiencing withdrawal to avoid or alleviate the symptoms.<sup>7-8</sup>
- **Fentanyl use is on the rise.** In 2016, nearly half of opioid-related overdose deaths involved fentanyl.<sup>9</sup> Illicitly-manufactured fentanyl (IMF) is now found in combination with other drugs, like heroin.<sup>9</sup> This means it is imperative to increase education on drug potency and combined illicit drugs.<sup>10</sup>
- **Comorbidities are exacerbated by the opioid crisis**, including Hepatitis C, HIV, and neonatal opioid withdrawal syndrome.<sup>11</sup>
- **Social and economic consequences have grown astronomically** in economic burden and increase in crime, violence, and disruptions in family, workplace, and educational environments.<sup>11</sup>

In 2016:<sup>12</sup>



**116 Americans died each day from drug overdose**



**\$504 billion in economic costs**



## The health education approach to prevention and treatment

A coordinated approach involving informed efforts of evidence-based harm reduction strategies is needed to curb the opioid prescribing/abuse epidemic and prevent deaths (e.g. health education, medical, mental, and social health services; health departments; nonprofit and community-based organizations; community members). **Medication-assisted treatment (MAT)**, an approach that combines medication (methadone, buprenorphine, or naltrexone) with counseling and behavioral therapies, is effective in preventing repeat overdose.<sup>7</sup> **Naloxone**, a medication that acts to block the effects of opioids, can reverse an overdose and can be life-saving.<sup>7</sup> **Prescription drug monitoring programs (PDMPs)** across states identify patients at risk of opioid addiction or overdose assuming enrolled prescribers regularly use PDMPs.<sup>13</sup>

**Health educators are vital in the education and prevention of opioid addiction and misuse.** Health education on national, state and local levels positively impacts the health of society through awareness, understanding and prevention.

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