

UNDERSTANDING THE OPIOID OVERDOSE CRISIS IN THE U.S.

Every day, more than 115 Americans die after overdosing on opioids. The misuse of and addiction to opioids—including [prescription pain relievers](#), [heroin](#), and synthetic opioids such as [fentanyl](#)—is a serious national crisis that affects public health as well as social and economic welfare.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that the total "economic burden" of prescription opioid misuse alone in the United States is \$78.5 billion a year, including the costs of healthcare, lost productivity, addiction treatment, and criminal justice involvement.

How did this happen?

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.

Opioid overdose rates began to increase. In 2015, more than 33,000 Americans died as a result of an opioid overdose, including prescription opioids, heroin, and illicitly manufactured fentanyl, a powerful synthetic opioid.

That same year, an estimated 2 million people in the United States suffered from substance use disorders related to prescription opioid pain relievers, and 591,000 suffered from a heroin use disorder (not mutually exclusive).

What do we know about the opioid crisis?

- Roughly 21 to 29 percent of patients prescribed opioids for chronic pain misuse them.
- Between 8 and 12 percent develop an opioid use disorder.
- An estimated 4 to 6 percent who misuse prescription opioids transition to [heroin](#).
- About 80 percent of people who use heroin first misused prescription opioids.
- Opioid overdoses increased 30 percent from July 2016 through September 2017 in 52 areas in 45 states.
- The Midwestern region saw opioid overdoses increase 70 percent from July 2016 through September 2017.
- Opioid overdoses in large cities increased by 54 percent in 16 states.

This issue has become a public health crisis with devastating consequences including increases in opioid misuse and related overdoses, as well as the rising incidence of neonatal abstinence syndrome due to opioid use and misuse during pregnancy.

The increase in injection drug use has also contributed to the spread of infectious diseases including HIV and hepatitis C. As seen throughout the history of medicine, science can be an important part of the solution in resolving such a public health crisis.

Source: [Opioid Overdose Crisis](#), National Institute on Drug Abuse, March 2018