

Talking Points: Drug Overdose Reduction Act



June 2010

Overdose deaths are an emerging national crisis:

- Overdoses nationwide more than doubled between 2000 and 2006.¹ More people died in the U.S. from overdose in 2006 (the latest year data is available) than from HIV/AIDS or homicide.² Significant federal funding is directed toward preventing HIV/AIDS and homicide, but virtually no federal dollars are designated for overdose prevention.
- Deaths resulting from accidental drug overdoses increased more than 400 percent between 1980 and 1999.³
- Nationally, more overdose deaths are caused by prescription drug abuse *than all illegal drugs combined*.⁴
- Legal prescription opiates, such as Oxycontin and Vicodin, are driving the increase in overdoses deaths nationally. Between 1999 and 2002, prescription opiate overdose deaths increased by 91.2%, yet deaths from heroin overdose increased only 12.4%. By 2002, prescription opiate overdoses deaths outnumbered either heroin or cocaine overdose deaths.⁵
- Overdose deaths are almost as common as car crash fatalities. Overdose is second only to motor-vehicle accidents as a leading cause of injury-related death in the U.S.⁶ And in sixteen states, overdose leads car crashes.⁷ Considering how often the media reports on a fatality in a traffic accident, it is alarming that overdose is occurring at similarly high rates.
- Middle-aged Americans are the hardest hit by the overdose crisis. More people aged 35 to 54 died of drug overdoses than in motor-vehicle accidents.⁸ Additionally, drug overdose is the number two injury-related killer among young adults ages 15-34.⁹

Overdose affects everyone. People from all walks of life are erroneously taking too much of a drug or combining one drug with alcohol and other drugs that increases the risk of overdose.¹⁰ Chronic pain patients, people suffering from temporary pain and individuals struggling with addiction are dying from overdose.

What can we do to combat overdose death?

Pass the Drug Overdose Reduction Act

U.S. House Representative Donna F. Edwards (D-MD) has introduced legislation (H.R. 2855) that would direct federal agencies responsible for public health and reducing drug-related harms to take action to reduce overdose deaths. The Drug Overdose Reduction Act will:

- Support new and existing overdose prevention programs in communities across the country through the creation of a grants program, making federal dollars available for overdose recognition and response trainings, the distribution of naloxone and other overdose prevention activities.
- Improve the government's ability to monitor and report trends in overdose deaths, enabling public health officials and professionals to warn the public about emerging overdose threats.
- Direct the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to create a national strategy for reducing overdose deaths and direct the National Institute on Drug Abuse to conduct research on new and existing overdose prevention methods.

Expand Programs to Reverse Opiate Overdose

Naloxone, or *Narcan*, is a life saving tool used to reverse opiate-based drug overdoses. Naloxone has been FDA-approved since 1971, and presents no potential for abuse as it has no pharmacological effect; it also has no effect if it is taken by a person that does not have opiates in their system. However, it still needs to be made more readily available to those who may be in a position to respond to an overdose.

- Drugs that can be reversed include heroin, Oxycontin, methadone, vicodin, percocet, fentanyl, and morphine. Naloxone takes as little as two minutes to start working, and provides the brief 30–90 minute window to call medical assistance during an overdose.

- Rescue methods buy time and save lives. Training people, including those at-risk of an overdose, those who reside with, interact with or care for people at-risk for a drug overdose – such as family members, health care providers, spouses, law enforcement officers and correctional officers – will greatly increase the likelihood that a drug overdose won't become fatal.¹¹¹²

We must demand action. Government officials and the public have largely ignored this hidden crisis, although it causes tens of thousands of preventable deaths every year.

Pass Medical Amnesty Laws

A *911 Good Samaritan Law* would encourage people to call 911 by creating an exemption from arrest, charge or prosecution for possession of small amounts of drugs or alcohol when needing or calling for medical assistance in the event of an overdose. The policy prioritizes saving lives over arrest for drug or alcohol possession.

Improve Government Overdose Data

Standards for investigating overdose deaths, recording details about the death, and determining the underlying cause of death vary from state-to-state. Important details such as identification of specific drugs involved in overdoses, place of death, age and gender are usually not transmitted from the county-level health department to the state epidemiology office and CDC. Budget constraints are creating serious injury-related death surveillance capacity gaps in many states.

¹ CDC WONDER Compressed Mortality File, ICD-10 Groups: X40-X44

² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS), "20 Leading Causes of Death, United States, 2006, All Races, Both Sexes"

³ CDC WONDER Compressed Mortality File, ICD-9 Groups: E850-E858

⁴ Paulozzi, LJ, Budnitz, DS, Xi, Y. Increasing deaths from opioid analgesics in the United States. *Pharmacoepidemiol Drug Safety* 2006; 15: 618-627.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, WONDER – Compressed Mortality – Underlying Cause of Death, ICD-10 codes X40-44

⁷ States with more overdose deaths than car crash deaths in 2006 are: Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, Oregon and Washington. Source: Stobbe M, "CDC: Drug deaths outpace crashes in more states," The Associated Press, September 30, 2009

⁸ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR), "QuickStats: Motor-Vehicle Traffic and Poisoning Death Rates, by Age - United States, 2005-2006," July 17, 2009, 58(27); 753

⁹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS), "20 Leading Causes of Death, United States, 2006, All Races, Both Sexes"

¹⁰ Testimony of Leonard J. Paulozzi, M.D., M.P.H., "Trends in Unintentional Drug Overdose Deaths," United States Senate, Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Hearing entitled "Generation Rx: The Abuse of Prescription and Over-the-Counter Drugs" on March 12, 2008

¹¹ Green TC, Heimer R & Grau LE, "Distinguishing signs of opioid overdose and indication for naloxone: an evaluation of six overdose training and naloxone distribution programs in the United States," *Addiction*, (2008) 103, pp. 979-989; Doe-Simkins M, Walley AY, Epstein A and Moyer P, "Saved by the nose: bystander-administered intranasal naloxone hydrochloride for opioid overdose," *American Journal of Public Health*, (2009) 99(5), pp. 788-791; Maxwell S, Bigg, D, Stanczykiewicz K and Carlberg-Racich S, "Prescribing Naloxone to Actively Injecting Heroin Users: A Program to Reduce Heroin Overdose Deaths," *Journal of Addictive Diseases*, (2006) 25(3), pp. 89-96; Kim D, Irwin KS and Khoshnood K, "Expanded Access to Naloxone: Options for Critical Response to the Epidemic of Opioid Overdose Mortality," *American Journal of Public Health* | March 2009, 99(3)

¹² Sherman SG, Gann DS, Tobin KE, Latkin CA, et al. "The Life They Save May Be Mine": Diffusion of overdose prevention information from a city sponsored programme," *International Journal of Drug Policy*, (2009), 20(2), pp. 137-142; Green TC, Heimer R & Grau LE, "Distinguishing signs of opioid overdose and indication for naloxone: an evaluation of six overdose training and naloxone distribution programs in the United States," *Addiction*, (2008) 103, pp. 979-989; Tobin KE, Sherman SG, Beilenson P, Welsh C et al., "Evaluation of the Staying Alive Programme: Training injection drug users to properly administer naloxone and save lives," *International Journal of Drug Policy*, (2008) 20(2), pp. 131-136