

Our national opioid crisis is one of the most talked-about topics nowadays. Though we hear about it often – and may even have personal experiences – it’s important to understand the facts, prevalence, and societal implications of the epidemic, as well as the effects of opioid dependency. Your **Employees Assistance Program (EAP)** is here to shed some light on the issue, and help you identify when and how to reach out for support.

24
HOURS
A DAY

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Opioid basics

Definitions and types of opioids

The terms opiates and opioids are often used interchangeably, and while both are widely accepted, there is a difference.

Opiates – Drugs that are naturally occurring and are derived from the opium poppy (i.e. morphine, codeine)

Opioids – Refers to the entire family of opiates (natural, synthetic, and semi-synthetic)

There are several types and brands of opioid drugs. Here’s a list of some of the most common ones, many of which may sound familiar:

- hydrocodone (Vicodin®)
- oxycodone (OxyContin®, Percocet®)
- morphine (Kadian®, Avinza®, Demerol®)
- codeine
- fentanyl
- heroin (illegal/street opioid)

How opioid addiction occurs

When taken as directed by a physician, prescription opioids are a safe and effective way to manage pain. Since these drugs also affect the brain’s reward centers, however, they can cause some people to experience a sense of euphoria. A physical dependence also occurs, and these factors point to a high risk for addiction.

THE OPIOID CRISIS

Risk factors

There are several circumstances that may indicate a person’s predisposition to opioid abuse; some examples include the following:

- Family and/or personal history of substance abuse
- Chronic pain, especially in conjunction with substance use and/or mental health disorders
- Access to prescription drugs in the home
- Age: teens, those in their early 20s, and older people
- Lack of knowledge about prescription drugs and their potential harm

The good, the bad, and the balance

As we now stare in the face of a full-blown addiction epidemic, it has become evident that prevention isn't as simple as making the drugs illegal, as with heroin. There are prescription opioids that serve a positive, effective purpose for many who need pain management.

The Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) Commissioner recognizes that too much regulation in an effort to mitigate abuse and addiction could come at the cost of proper care for those who need and use opioids as intended, such as those who live with serious chronic pain or are managing end-of-life pain.

As a result, steering committees and other policy groups are working to tackle the issue from all perspectives, and there are things we all can do to contribute to ending the crisis.

Take action

As we all work toward shifting the statistics, here are some ways you can help prevent opioid misuse – for yourself and others:

Use as directed – Never alter medication dosage without first discussing it with a healthcare provider. This holds true whether you're taking more than is prescribed; taking less than prescribed; or taking too little out of fear of dependency; each has its own implications. If you've just come out of major surgery, for example, reducing the amount of medication in your body too soon can interfere with the recovery and pain management process.

Ask about drug interactions – Not all medications mix well with others. Talk to your doctor to avoid potentially negative interactions with your prescribed opioids. Be transparent about all other medications and supplements you take (prescription or otherwise), and ask questions to alleviate any concerns.

Safely dispose of unused medication – Just having access to prescription drugs in the home means that family members, friends, and visitors are all potentially at risk for misuse. If you're no longer taking a prescription medication for any reason – even if it's not expired – check with your pharmacist, or refer to the guidance set by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) about how to properly dispose of the unused portion. Or, find out about take-back days at local community agencies, and even some federal agencies, that allow you to turn in prescription medications, no questions asked.

Check in with yourself – If you begin to notice changes in your behavior, habits, mood, or physical well-being seek help from your doctor right away. Early identification of possible opioid abuse is the key to preventing ongoing misuse or addiction.

Substance abuse support and recovery

If you believe you or a loved one may have a problem with opioid misuse or addiction, seek help right away. Your EAP is a great place to start, as it is designed to assist employees in resolving personal problems related to substance abuse. Whether you personally struggle with substance abuse or you need help addressing the issue with a friend or family member, the EAP is here to help 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Call any time, day or night, to speak with an expert who can offer guidance, schedule a consultation, and provide resources, information, and referrals based on your needs.

Opioid addiction is a disease, and though it can't be cured, it can be managed and treated. Treatment programs are available and can help with detoxification and withdrawal, and coping skills, as well as support for both the patient and family members.

The EAP is a voluntary and confidential employee benefit available to federal employees and their family members at no cost.