

You can save a life with Narcan

By Jace Dyckman

During 10 days in January, at least 36 drug overdoses were reported in Montana, including eight fatal overdoses, according to state health and law enforcement authorities. All of these overdoses involved non-prescription fentanyl, a highly potent opioid that has become a popular – and deadly – street drug.

Between Jan. 1 and mid-March, Yellowstone County alone counted 47 suspected drug overdoses, including 10 fatal overdoses, according to preliminary information from the Montana Department of Justice. Most of the overdoses reported involved opioids.

Non-prescription fentanyl (often in blue M30 pills) is being used every day in our community. Sometimes, people don't even know they are using fentanyl because drug dealers have mixed it with other illicit drugs, including methamphetamine.

The rise of fentanyl misuse has made Narcan an essential, lifesaving tool. Narcan is a nasal spray containing a medication that can quickly reverse an opioid overdose. Narcan is effective against all opioids, such as morphine, heroin and fentanyl. You don't need to be a healthcare professional to carry Narcan to use in case you encounter an overdose emergency.

Montana law authorizes retail pharmacies to dispense Narcan on request – without a prescription. You can go to any pharmacy that stocks Narcan and purchase it. The pharmacy may bill your insurance company and there may be a copay.

The state of Montana also provides Narcan at no charge through grants to designated community providers. In Yellowstone County, RiverStone Health and Rimrock provide Narcan at no charge.

To get Narcan at no charge:

- Call RiverStone Health at 406-651-6416 and leave a message that you need Narcan. You may also call this phone number to arrange for a brief presentation at your business or organization on how to administer Narcan. Everyone who is trained will receive Narcan to keep on hand for emergencies.
- To request Narcan at Rimrock, 1231 N. 29th, stop by the front desk between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. weekdays. The receptionist will provide brief instructions for administering Narcan and provide a package with two doses. After hours, people may go to Rimrock's back door, ring the bell and request Narcan from the staff.

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that is 50 times stronger than heroin. Two salt-sized grains of fentanyl can be enough to cause an adult to overdose. As prescription medicine for severe pain, fentanyl doses must be carefully administered to avoid overdose. As a street drug, fentanyl is lethal because the dosage is inconsistent and the user doesn't know how potent the pill or injection will be.

Who ought to carry Narcan? People whose family, friends or clients are using opioids. Even a person using opioids with a prescription can overdose.

Narcan is an easy-to-use nasal spray. There are no side effects. If Narcan is given to a person who isn't overdosing on opioids, it won't harm the person. However, Narcan only works on opioid overdoses – not on overdoses of other substances, such as methamphetamine.

What are the signs that someone may have overdosed on opioids?

- Nodding out or falling asleep.
- Unresponsive, passed out.
- Blue lips, blue fingers or slow breathing.
- Pinpoint eye pupils.

Narcan has become a basic, lifesaving tool. I carry two doses of Narcan in my backpack and I've used Narcan numerous times to aid people who overdosed. Local law enforcement officers and emergency medical responders are carrying Narcan. You can, too.

Jace Dyckman, prevention health specialist with RiverStone Health, can be reached at 406-651-6416 or Jace.Dyc@RiverStoneHealth.org.