

How to respond to an opioid overdose

By **Melissa Henderson**

The national opioid epidemic has impacted individuals in every community and of every demographic. Opioids are a type of medication commonly prescribed to manage or treat pain. This type of drug includes morphine, oxycodone, and fentanyl, among others. Even kratom, a “natural alternative” for pain management can lead to opioid-like overdoses.

Unfortunately, opioids are highly addictive and can lead to overdoses. Overdoses can lead to death and minutes matter. Naloxone, often called Narcan, is a drug that can reverse an opioid overdose and save lives.

Data on opioid overdoses is difficult to gather. Many are not reported to law enforcement or health care agencies. In 2024, there were 174 suspected overdoses reported in Yellowstone County, at least 5 of which resulted in death. Of the 174 cases, naloxone was given in 77.

Many of us would do what we could to help someone in need – whether they fell, needed CPR, or were having a seizure. We don’t need to understand why they fell or agree with their choices – we jump in to help our neighbor in need. An overdose should be no different. Learn to recognize the signs and be prepared to respond quickly. You can likely save a life.

Signs of an opioid overdose include the following:

- Cold and clammy skin
- Limp body
- Discolored skin, such as blue lips and nails
- Choking or gurgling sounds
- Losing consciousness or trouble staying awake
- Slow, weak, or no breathing
- Slurred speech
- Confusion or disoriented behavior
- Small pupils that look like pinpoints

If you see someone who is likely overdosing, it is important to jump into action quickly. An overdose can be fatal within minutes. Being prepared can potentially save a life.

Step 1. Call 911.

Step 2. If on hand, administer naloxone. In some cases, you may need to use more than one naloxone. Naloxone is available as a nasal spray and injection. Nasal sprays are the most common form, but instructions may vary. Look for an easy-to-use handout in the medication packaging. In most cases, you

will remove the nasal spray from the package, insert it into the person's nose, and then press firmly to spray into their nostril. Serious side effects from naloxone are rare. If someone is experiencing an opioid overdose, the naloxone should start to wake them up within 2 – 3 minutes. If they do wake up, but start to lose consciousness again, you may need to give a second dose of naloxone.

Step 3. Try to keep the person awake and breathing. Like other injuries, it is important to keep the person you are trying to help awake and as conscious as possible.

Step 4. Lay the person on their side to keep them from choking.

Step 5. Stay with the person until emergency responders arrive. This allows you to do what you can to keep the person awake. This also provides you an opportunity to inform first responders with a summary of what you witnessed and any treatment you provided.

Anyone can carry naloxone. Prescriptions are no longer required. Montana has a good Samaritan law that protects people without medical training if they administer lifesaving treatment like naloxone. This same law protects to person experiencing an overdose from being arrested for seeking medical help during an emergency.

Later this year, RiverStone Health will be working with area businesses, churches, organizations and more to make naloxone more readily available in the community.

It may seem intimidating, but being prepared can save a life.

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