

# About the Opioid Epidemic



## What are opioids?

Opioids are drugs that include:

- Prescription pain relievers such as hydrocodone (Vicodin®), oxycodone (OxyContin®, Percocet®), oxymorphone (Opana®), morphine (Kadian®, Avinza®), Tylenol® with codeine, and others.
- The synthetic drug fentanyl, which is available as a legal prescription (often in the form of patches or lollipops) but is also manufactured and distributed illicitly on the black market.
- The illicit drug heroin.

All opioids—including prescription opioids, heroin, and fentanyl—affect the brain and body in the same way. They activate opioid receptors on nerve cells located in the brain and body.

Opioid pain relievers can be effective in treatment for relieving pain; however, regular use can lead to dependence, and misuse of opioids can lead to addiction, overdose and death.

## What are substance use disorders?

Substance use disorder, also known as addiction, is a chronic, relapsing brain disease that is characterized by compulsive drug-seeking and use despite harmful consequences. When a

disease is chronic, that means it's long-lasting. Remission is possible and can be managed with treatment. Other examples of chronic diseases are asthma, diabetes, and heart disease. Opioid use disorder is when someone has an addiction to opioids specifically.

## How has the opioid epidemic affected North Carolina?

The numbers are devastating in our state:

- Five people die from opioid overdoses every day, on average.
- More people die from opioid overdoses than car crashes.
- More than 2,000 North Carolinians died of an opioid overdose in 2017 – a 32 percent increase over the previous year.
- Between 1999 and 2017, more than 13,169 North Carolina residents have lost their lives to unintentional opioid overdoses.
- The number of unintentional opioid overdose deaths in 2017 was nearly 17 times higher than in 1999.
- The number of unintentional opioid overdose deaths has more than doubled in the past decade.
- In 2017, there were nearly 125 unintentional opioid-related overdose emergency department visits per week on average.

More information on the opioid crisis in North Carolina can be found at [MorePowerfulNC.org](https://www.morepowerfulnc.org).

## How has the opioid epidemic affected the United States?

The numbers in relation to the entire country paint a troubling picture of the crisis:

- More than 130 people die every day from opioid overdoses.
- 47,600 people died from opioid overdoses in 2018.
- 11.4 million people misused prescription opioids, and 2.1 million had a substance use disorder.
- Life expectancy in the United States has declined for three years in a row, fueled in part by a record number of drug overdose deaths.
- Overdoses kill more Americans than car crashes or gun violence.
- Addiction contributes to mass incarceration. In 2010, 85 percent of the U.S. prison population was incarcerated for substance-related reasons, with more than half of all inmates diagnosed with substance use disorders.

More information on the national epidemic can be found at [MorePowerfulNC.org](https://www.morepowerfulnc.org).

## How is North Carolina addressing the opioid epidemic?

North Carolina has taken many steps over the past several years to address the epidemic in our state.

The [Opioid Action Plan](#) was developed with community partners to combat the opioid crisis.

Strategies in the plan include:

- Reducing the oversupply of prescription opioids.
- Reducing the diversion of prescription drugs and the flow of illicit drugs.
- Increasing community awareness and prevention.
- Making naloxone widely available.
- Expanding treatment and recovery systems of care.
- Measuring the effectiveness of these strategies based on results.
- Coordinating the state's infrastructure to better tackle the opioid crisis.

Working with legislative leaders, law enforcement officers, healthcare providers, and advocates, Attorney General Stein helped draft and pass a number of laws and developed solutions to fight the crisis:

- The Strengthen Opioid Misuse Prevention Act (STOP Act) aims to reduce the number of people who become addicted to prescription opioids by mandating smarter prescribing practices.
- The Synthetic Opioid Control Act closed a loophole in North Carolina law to help law

enforcement go after fentanyl traffickers by classifying all derivatives of the deadly drug fentanyl as a controlled substance under state law.

- The Heroin and Opioid Prevention Act (HOPE Act) gives law enforcement authorities additional tools to go after drug traffickers and dealers.

Law enforcement and justice system stakeholders are also implementing innovative solutions, including drug courts and pre-arrest diversion programs, to help people with substance use disorder get treatment and begin the path to recovery.

### How is the federal government addressing the opioid epidemic?

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the National Institutes of Health, and the Centers for Disease Control have developed guidelines, clinical tools, resources, and trainings to address the crisis in key areas. Additionally, the federal government is focused on fighting the crisis through efforts including:

- Promoting the development of evidence-based prevention and prescription drug monitoring programs and safe prescribing practices.
- Improving overdose responses.
- Enhancing evidence-based addiction treatment and eliminating barriers to treatment availability.
- Strengthening the treatment and recovery infrastructure.

- Supporting drug courts and diversion programs.
- Expanding access to programs for people in recovery, including peer recovery support and employment opportunities.
- Disrupting drug traffickers and trafficking production and supply chains.
- Combating illicit internet drug sales and drug delivery.

### How are local governments addressing the opioid epidemic?

Local governments are using a wide range of innovative strategies to address the opioid epidemic. These strategies include:

- Creating and supporting community anti-drug coalitions to bring all stakeholders to the table and forge community solutions.
- Working with schools on programs and curricula to foster healthy, resilient young people.
- Encouraging residents to dispose of leftover medications, installing medication take back boxes, and holding drug take back events.
- Encouraging residents to get help, get involved, and get the facts about the opioid epidemic.
- Working with community groups, harm reduction workers, emergency medical responders, and healthcare providers to make the overdose-reversal drug naloxone more widely available.
- Working with emergency medical response systems and healthcare providers to offer services and support to overdose survivors.

- Working with law enforcement and the justice system to provide low-level offenders with addiction the treatment and services they need to get better.
- Creating, supporting, and expanding syringe exchange programs that have been proven to reduce the risk of disease and overdose and improve access to healthcare and treatment.
- Supporting people in recovery from addiction through relapse prevention efforts and assistance with housing, transportation, employment, and other needs.

More information about the epidemic and local, state, and federal governments' responses can be found at [MorePowerfulNC.org](http://MorePowerfulNC.org).