Factors Associated with Risk of Opioid (Prescription and Non-Prescription) Misuse and Overdose

Many factors influence a person’s chance of misusing opioids, developing an opioid use disorder, and/or experiencing an opioid overdose. Effective prevention focuses on reducing those risk factors, and strengthening protective factors, that are most closely related to opioids. Understanding these factors can help us assess, plan for, and select interventions designed to address them. This material describes some of the risk and protective factors that are associated with opioid (prescription and non-prescription) misuse and overdose.

FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH THE NON-MEDICAL USE OF PRESCRIPTION DRUGS

The non-medical use of prescription drugs (NMUPD)—which includes prescription opioids—is defined as the use of prescription drugs for reasons or in ways other than as prescribed, or without a prescription. Select risk and protective factors associated with increased (and decreased) risk of NMUPD include:

Risk Factors

- History of mental illness (i.e., history of depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety)
- Acute and chronic pain (i.e., having a current painful physical disorder, chronic pain, past-year back pain)

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- Physical health problems (i.e. fatigue\(^7\), headaches\(^8\))
- History of other substance use or misuse\(^9\)

**Protective Factors**

- Committing to doing well\(^{10}\) and/or finishing school\(^{11}\)
- Perception that prescription drugs can be harmful\(^{10}\)
- Strong bonds to parents\(^{12}\)
- Community norms that disapprove of NMUDP\(^{10}\)

For more information about the factors associated with NMUDP, see *Preventing Prescription Drug Misuse: Understanding Who is at Risk* (available at [https://www.samhsa.gov/capt/tools-learning-resources/preventing-prescription-drug-misuse-understanding-who-risk](https://www.samhsa.gov/capt/tools-learning-resources/preventing-prescription-drug-misuse-understanding-who-risk)).

**FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH NON-PRESCRIPTION OPIOID USE**

The use of non-prescription opioids includes heroin, illegally-made fentanyl, and other non-prescription opioids. Select risk and protective factors associated with increased (and decreased) risk of NMUPD include:

**Risk Factors**

- History of poly-drug use, especially combined inhalant and marijuana use\(^{13}\)
- Having ever been in jail or a detention center\(^{13}\)

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• Having experienced a history of child abuse (sexual, physical or emotional)\textsuperscript{14}

**Protective Factors**

• Having high IQ scores\textsuperscript{15}

• Having high socioeconomic status\textsuperscript{15}


**FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH OPIOID OVERDOSE**

An overdose is bodily harm that occurs when a person takes an excessive amount of a substance or a dangerous combination of substances. During an opioid overdose, a person’s breathing slows down and may stop. An overdose can be fatal or non-fatal. Select risk and protective factors associated with opioid overdose include:

**Risk Factors**

• Adverse life experiences—including witnessing a family member overdose, financial struggles such as unemployment, and homelessness.\textsuperscript{16}

• Having experienced a prior opioid overdose\textsuperscript{17}

While the research is limited, there is practice-based evidence to suggest that certain “preventative behaviors” are associated with reduced risk for opioid overdose. These include:

• Not using opioids alone (in other words, using with other individuals who can call for help in the event of an overdose emergency)

• Using in small doses, and injecting slowly


