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Understanding Opioids Without the Stigma

The opioid epidemic in the United States impacts millions of lives every day.

What are opioids?

Opioids are a class of drugs that include powerful prescription pain relievers. In prescription drug form, they have names like fentanyl, codeine, morphine, tramadol. Opioids are also present in street drugs like heroin. Prescription opioids are typically prescribed by physicians for pain management. They are often prescribed for conditions like cancer or after surgeries or injuries where pain is likely.



Opioid use disorder has become a major public health crisis in the United States. Millions of Americans are affected every day by opioid addiction and overdose.

Why are opioids dangerous?

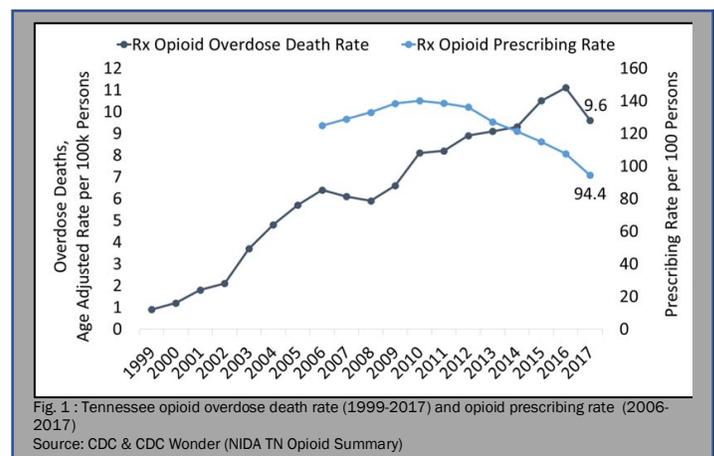
Although opioids can be very effective at managing pain, the risk of becoming addicted is very high even with limited use. Addiction to opioids or other substances indicates a chronic, relapsing brain disease. There is a strong, euphoric high that many people feel when they use opioids. When someone

uses opioids regularly, they build up a tolerance to the drugs' effects, making overdose a common outcome as they try to achieve pain relief or the same euphoric high using larger and larger amounts of opioids. Suicide and other mental illnesses often accompany substance use disorder.

Opioids in TN

In 2017, there were more than 1200 overdose deaths attributed to opioids. The greatest increase in opioid deaths is linked to synthetic opioids like fentanyl, an opioid that can be fatal in very tiny doses.

Tennessee providers wrote 94.4 opioid prescriptions for every 100 persons in 2017, a 25% decline in the rate since 2013. Despite this decline, Tennessee is still ranked third in the United States for the highest number of prescriptions per person.





Stigma of addiction

In the United States, we often think of drug abuse and addiction as a moral failure. Many people believe that addiction is a choice and that those who use and misuse have weak character. In fact, drug addiction is a chronic health condition that requires treatment, just like hypertension, diabetes, or arthritis. The effects of stigmatizing persons with opioid use disorder include social isolation, discrimination, and prejudice, and this decreases the likelihood that they will seek treatment and maintain sobriety.

To reduce stigma, remember that...

- Supporting a loved one is important to their recovery and helps to lessen the stigma they may feel
- Failure to keep sobriety or continuing to misuse opioids are not reflections on the person's character
- Recovery looks different for everyone and everyone is deserving of treatment
- Avoid hurtful language like "junkie" and "addict"

What are alternatives to opioids?

Alternatives to opioids exist, but their effectiveness depends on several factors. For long-term pain management, opioids are very effective and may be more necessary. For acute pain management, such as a tooth extraction, opioids are considered less appropriate.

For patients who need opioids long-term, there are several possible alternative therapies that could be useful, depending on why opioids would be prescribed. Some options are listed below.

- | | |
|--------------------|------------------------------|
| - Physical therapy | - Therapeutic Massage |
| - Acupuncture | - NSAID (aspirin, etc.) |
| - Surgery | - Injections, nerve blockers |

Strategies to end the opioid-driven addiction epidemic should include different systems working together.

- Reduce stigma around opioid use disorder through education
- Address social causes of substance abuse through sustained investment in schools, affordable housing, and quality job training
- Expand access to affordable healthcare, including mental health services
- Adopt evidence-based programs like naloxone syringe services and safe injection sites
- Expand access to medications for opioid use disorder without judgment or undue barriers

Do you need help finding free or state funded addiction treatment and recovery services in Tennessee?
Call the Tennessee **REDLINE toll-free 24/7** now
1-800-889-9789

References & Resources:

- Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health, ASPPH Task Force on Public Health Initiatives to Address Opioid Crisis (May 2019).
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