

Drug overdose

An overdose occurs when an excessive amount of a drug or poison is taken, leading to a toxic (poisonous) effect on the body. There are many drugs that can cause harm when too much is taken including alcohol, prescription drugs, over-the-counter drugs, illegal drugs and some herbal remedies.

Always call an ambulance if a drug overdose is known or suspected. Many overdoses do not cause permanent damage and most people make a full recovery. Some overdoses can cause damage to certain organs such as the liver and kidneys. If the overdose was an attempt at self-harm, this requires careful ongoing treatment.

The symptoms vary widely

A wide range of symptoms can occur and everyone responds differently. Symptoms depend on the drug, the amount taken and the person's bodily constitution. Some poisons are weak and cause minor distress, while others are very strong and can cause more serious problems and possibly death. General symptoms of a drug overdose may include:

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Dizziness
- Fitting
- Drowsiness
- Confusion
- Coma
- Breathing problems.

Reasons for overdose

The main reasons for taking an overdose include:

- **Accidental** - a person takes the wrong drug or combination of drugs, in the wrong amount or at the wrong time, not knowing that it could cause them harm.
- **Intentional misuse** - a person takes an overdose to get 'high' or to deliberately inflict self-harm. The latter may be a cry for help or a suicide attempt. This may be caused by relationship problems with family and friends. On the other hand, the person may be suffering from a mental health condition such as depression or schizophrenia.

Risk factors

People of any age may take a drug overdose, though certain groups are at increased risk including:

- Young adults
- Middle aged people
- Women, who are more likely to overdose than men.

Other risk factors include:

- The risk is increased when more than one drug is taken at the same time.
- The risk is increased when the body is not used to taking a certain drug.

Treatment options

Medical care depends on the drug taken and the person's medical needs. Options include:

- Full assessment in the emergency department - blood tests, observation and psychological review
- Phoning the Poisons Information Centre for advice
- Removing the drug from the body - for example, giving activated charcoal which binds the drug so the body can't absorb it
- Administering an antidote, which is possible for some drugs
- Admission to hospital for further treatment
- A check-up by the person's local doctor is important for everyone who has had an overdose, to check that there is no delayed damage.

If you have concerns or questions at any time, contact your local doctor. In an emergency, you should return to the emergency department.

Activated charcoal - home care suggestions

If charcoal was given in hospital, it will be passed with the next bowel motion in a day or two. Home care suggestions include:

- Follow all instructions given to you by your doctor.
- Some people can get constipated, so try to drink plenty of water to stop this from happening.
- Charcoal may absorb other medications taken. Women taking the oral contraceptive pill should use another method of contraception until their next period.

Prevention strategies

Some ways to avoid overdose happening again include:

- Maintain a healthy lifestyle - don't smoke, have regular exercise and maintain a healthy diet.
- Avoid drugs of any kind unless advised by a doctor.
- Always warn a doctor of a previous overdose.
- Always read the labels carefully.
- Keep all drugs and poisons locked away in a safe secure place.

First aid suggestions

If you think someone has taken an overdose, suggestions include:

- Call the Poisons Information Centre on 131 126, even if the person seems okay. The centre is open 24 hours a day, everyday, Australia-wide.
- Call 000 and ask for an ambulance. Ask for the police if the person is violent.
- Do not try to make them vomit.
- Bring the pill containers to hospital.
- A basic first aid course is advised for all adults.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- The emergency department of your nearest hospital
- Always call an ambulance in an emergency Tel. 000
- Poisons Information Centre Tel. 131 126
- Lifeline Tel. 131 114
- Alcohol and Drugs Direct Line Tel. 1800 888 236
- St John Ambulance Australia (first aid courses) Tel. (03) 9696 0000
- Family Drug Help – for information and support for people concerned about a relative or friend using drugs Tel. 1300 660 068

Things to remember

- There are many drugs that can cause harm when too much is taken including alcohol, prescription drugs, over-the-counter drugs, illegal drugs and some herbal remedies.
- Always call an ambulance if a drug overdose is known or suspected.
- If the overdose was an attempt at self-harm, this requires careful ongoing treatment.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Better Health Channel

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