
Drug overdose

Summary

- Alcohol, medications, illegal drugs and some herbal remedies can cause harm if you take too much. This is called overdose.
 - Your risk of overdose increases when you take more than one of these substances at a time, or if your body is not used to taking a substance.
 - If someone has had an overdose, or if you think they might have, call triple zero (000) for an ambulance immediately.
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An overdose is when you take a toxic (poisonous) amount of a drug or medicine. It is important to remember that not all overdoses are fatal or life threatening, however medical advice should always be sought if overdose is suspected or has occurred.

An overdose is a medical emergency that requires immediate medical attention. Always call triple zero (000) if you know or think that someone has had an overdose.

Substances that people can overdose on include:

- alcohol
- prescription medications
- over-the-counter (non-prescription) medications
- illegal drugs
- some herbal remedies.

Symptoms of overdose

A wide range of signs and symptoms can occur when a person overdoses, and everyone responds differently. Signs and symptoms depend on a variety of factors including:

- which substance they took
- how much they took
- how they took it
- their state of health
- their age
- other factors.

Symptoms of a drug overdose (including alcohol poisoning) may include:

- nausea and vomiting
 - severe stomach pain abdominal cramps
 - diarrhoea
 - chest pain
 - dizziness
 - loss of balance
 - loss of co-ordination
 - being unresponsive, but awake
 - limp body
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- seizures (fitting)
- drowsiness
- confusion
- agitation
- paranoia
- slow or erratic pulse
- difficulty breathing, shallow or erratic breathing or not breathing at all
- hallucination
- visual disturbances
- choking or gurgling sounds
- snoring deeply
- blue fingernails or lips
- pale or clammy face
- loss of consciousness.

First aid for overdose

Some knowledge of basic first aid could mean the difference between life and death in an emergency. Consider doing a first aid course, so that you will be able to manage if someone is injured or becomes ill.

If you think someone has taken an overdose:

- Stay calm.
- Call triple zero (000) for an ambulance.
- If the person is unconscious but breathing, place them on their side in the recovery position. Make sure that the airway remains open by tilting the head back and lifting the chin. Check breathing and monitor their condition until help arrives.
- Do not try to make the person vomit.
- Do not give them anything to eat or drink.
- Keep any pill containers to take to the hospital.

Go to **Overdose – what to do in an emergency** for detailed information about dialling triple zero for a drug overdose, and what will happen in the emergency department.

If you think someone may have taken an overdose but they are not showing any symptoms and seem okay, call the Poisons Information Centre on 13 11 26 (24 hours, 7 days) for advice on what to do. An overdose can still be an emergency, even if the person seems okay at first. Paracetamol overdose is an example of this.

Paracetamol overdose

Paracetamol is a common pain reliever and fever reducer that is usually bought over the counter without a prescription. It is one of the most common medicines taken by young children in an accidental overdose. Paracetamol is also commonly taken by people who intend to harm themselves (suicide attempts).

Signs of paracetamol overdose include:

- drowsiness
- coma
- seizures
- abdominal pain
- nausea
- vomiting.

Another name for paracetamol is acetaminophen (often known by its brand name, Panadol®).

There is only a small difference between the maximum daily dose of paracetamol and an overdose, which can cause liver damage. Large amounts of paracetamol are very dangerous, but the effects often don't show until about two to three days after taking the tablets. However, treatment must be started early to be effective, before the effects begin.

Always seek treatment for paracetamol overdose immediately, even if the person seems quite well.

Treatment for drug overdose

Medical care for overdose depends on:

- the drug (or drugs) taken
- the dose
- when and how the drug was taken
- what else it was taken with
- the effect on the person, including any medical complications resulting from the overdose.

If you go to hospital for a suspected drug overdose, the healthcare team will:

- perform a full assessment in the emergency department – which may include blood tests, observation and psychological review
- remove the drug from your body – for example, by giving activated charcoal, which binds the drug so the body can't absorb it
- administer an antidote, when possible – for example, naloxone hydrochloride (brand names Prenoxad®, Nyxoid®) is a drug that can reverse opioid overdose
- admit you to hospital for further treatment.

A follow-up appointment with your doctor is important for everyone who has had an overdose. Your doctor can monitor your healing, advise on continued treatment (if required) or arrange for further help (referral).

Self-care after treatment with activated charcoal

If you were given charcoal in hospital, you will pass it with your next bowel motion in a day or two. Home care suggestions include:

- Follow all instructions given by the doctor.
- Drink plenty of water to avoid constipation.
- Be aware that charcoal could interfere with the effectiveness of other medications you may be taking. For example, if you are taking the oral contraceptive pill, you will need to use another method of contraception until your next period. If you are unsure about how charcoal may affect your other medications and what to do about it, ask your doctor.

Reasons for overdose

Taking an overdose may be:

- **accidental** – if a person takes the wrong substance or combination of substances in the wrong amount or at the wrong time without knowing that it could cause them harm
- **intentional** – a person takes an overdose to get 'high' or to inflict self-harm (which may be a cry for help or a suicide attempt).

Overdose risk factors

People of any age may overdose. The risk is increased when:

- more than one substance is taken at the same time
- the body is not used to taking a certain substance.

Preventing overdose

Some ways to avoid overdose include:

- Always read medication labels carefully. Take prescription medications only as directed. Keep all medications in their original packaging.
- Avoid drugs of any kind unless advised by a doctor.
- Always tell your doctor or other health professional if you have had an overdose before.
- Do not keep medications you no longer need. Return them to the pharmacist.
- Keep all medicines, alcohol, drugs and poisons locked away in a safe secure place and out of reach of children.
- Be careful when taking different substances (including alcohol) at the same time. They can interact negatively and increase your risk of overdose.

Drug use precautions

The best way to avoid overdose from illegal drugs is not to use them. If you do use them, take precautions including:

- If you haven't used illicit drugs such as heroin for a while, be aware that your tolerance is likely to be a lot lower than it was before – use a smaller amount.
- If using illegal drugs from an unknown source or of unknown purity, have a smaller amount at first.
- Try to avoid using alone – let someone know where you are and what you are doing, or have a friend with you.

Where to get help

- In an emergency, always call triple zero (000)
- Emergency department of your nearest hospital
- **Victorian Poisons Information Centre** Tel. **13 11 26** – for advice when poisoning or suspected poisoning occurs and for poisoning prevention information (24 hours, 7 days)
- Your **GP (doctor)**
- **Suicide Call Back Service** Tel. **1300 659 467**
- **Lifeline** Tel. **13 11 14**
- **DirectLine** Tel. **1800 888 236** – for 24-hour confidential drug and alcohol telephone counselling, information and referral
- **Family Drug Help** Tel. **1300 660 068** – for information and support for people concerned about a relative or friend using drugs
- **St John Ambulance Australia** (first aid courses) Tel. **1300 360 455**

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