Drug overdose
Summary

- Many substances can cause harm when too much is taken, including alcohol, prescription and over-the-counter medications, illegal drugs and some herbal remedies.
- The risk is increased when more than one drug is taken at the same time or the body is not used to taking a certain drug.
- If a drug overdose is known or suspected, call triple zero (000) for an ambulance immediately.
- Keep all drugs and poisons locked away in a safe, secure place and take only as directed.

An overdose occurs when a toxic (poisonous) amount of a drug or medicine is taken. Substances that can cause harm when too much is taken include alcohol, prescription and over-the-counter medications, illegal drugs and some herbal remedies.

An overdose is a medical emergency that requires immediate medical attention. Always call triple zero (000) if a drug overdose is known or suspected.

A person’s tolerance to overdose varies with age, state of health, how the substance was consumed and other factors. The body often heals with or without treatment. However, death is a risk in some cases. This may be instant or may follow more slowly if organs are permanently damaged.

Treatment for overdose may be short term or may involve ongoing treatment (for example, in the case of self-harm or attempted suicide).

Symptoms of drug 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 drug is taken, the amount taken and the person’s state of health at the time.

General symptoms of a drug overdose may include:

- nausea
- vomiting
- abdominal cramps
- diarrhoea
- dizziness
- loss of balance
- seizures (fitting)
- drowsiness
- confusion
- breathing difficulties/not breathing
- internal bleeding
- hallucination
- visual disturbances
- snoring deeply
- turning blue
- coma.

Reasons for overdose

Taking an overdose may be:

- accidental – a person takes the wrong drug or combination of drugs, in the wrong amount or at the wrong time without knowing that it could cause them harm
- intentional misuse – a person takes an overdose to get ‘high’ or to inflict self-harm (which may be a cry for help or a suicide attempt).

Risk factors of drug overdose

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

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

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 and 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.

First aid for drug overdose

If you think someone has taken an overdose:

- Stay calm.
- Call an ambulance on triple zero (000).
- 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.
- Bring the pill containers to hospital.
- Even if the person seems okay, call the Poisons Information Centre on 13 11 26 for advice on what to do to help. The centre is open 24 hours, 7 days a week.

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.

Prevention of drug overdose

Some ways to avoid overdose include:

- Always read medication labels carefully and take prescription medications only as directed. Keep all medications in their original packaging.
- Avoid drugs of any kind unless advised by a doctor.
- Always inform your doctor or other health professional of a previous overdose.
- Do not stockpile unnecessary drugs. Return them to the pharmacist if you no longer need them.
- Keep all drugs and poisons locked away in a safe secure place and out of reach of children.
- Be cautious when taking different drugs or substances (including alcohol) at or around the same time as they can interact negatively and increase the risk of overdose.

Drug use precautions

The best way to avoid overdose from illegal drugs is not to use them. If you do use, 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 – it would be best to 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.

Treatment for drug overdose

Medical care depends on the drug (or drugs) taken, the dose and the effect on the person. This may depend on when and how the drug was taken, what else it was taken with and 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 (trade name Narcan®) is a drug that can reverse opioid overdose admit you to hospital for further treatment.

A follow-up by the 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 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 by the doctor.
- Some people can get constipated. Drinking plenty of water should stop this from happening.
- Charcoal could interfere with the effectiveness of other medications – for example, women taking the oral contraceptive pill should use another method of contraception until their next period.

Where to get help

- 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)
• In an emergency, always call triple zero (000)
• Emergency department of your nearest hospital
• Your doctor
• Lifeline Tel. 13 11 14
• DirectLine Tel. 1800 888 236 – for 24-hour confidential drug and alcohol telephone counselling, information and referral
• St John Ambulance Australia (first aid courses) Tel. 1300 360 455
• Family Drug Help Tel. 1300 660 068 – for information and support for people concerned about a relative or friend using drugs

**Things to remember**

• Many substances can cause harm when too much is taken, including alcohol, prescription and over-the-counter medications, illegal drugs and some herbal remedies.
• The risk is increased when more than one drug is taken at the same time or the body is not used to taking a certain drug.
• If a drug overdose is known or suspected, call triple zero (000) for an ambulance immediately.
• Keep all drugs and poisons locked away in a safe, secure place and take only as directed.

**References**

• Using paracetamol or ibuprofen, Parenting and Child Health, Women’s and Children’s Health Network, South Australia. More information here.
Drugs

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- Drugs and addiction explained
- Types of drugs
- Health effects of drugs
- Minimising harm
- Getting help for addiction

Drugs and addiction explained

- Addiction
  Addiction is a craving to use a substance or to repeat a behaviour...
- Alcohol and drugs - dependence and addiction
  Asking for help when you first suspect you have an alcohol or drug problem is important. If you think you have an addiction, speak to your local doctor or phone Directline...
- Drug use in Victoria
  Surveys provide information about drug use and the characteristics of people who use drugs in Victoria and Australia.

Types of drugs

- Alcohol explained
  The size of a standard drink can vary according to the type of alcohol...
- Amphetamines
  Amphetamines are psychostimulant drugs that speed up the workings of the brain...
- Anabolic steroids
  Prolonged misuse of steroids can cause liver damage and severe mood swings...
- Benzodiazepines
  Benzodiazepines (tranquillisers) are highly addictive and should only be used for certain conditions in a short-term or emergency situation...
- Caffeine
  Caffeine is a stimulant that acts on the brain and nervous system...
- Cannabis (marijuana)
Cannabis has many harmful effects on health...

- **Cocaine**
  Cocaine is a highly addictive illegal stimulant that has serious side effects...

- **Ecstasy**
  Ecstasy is an illegal stimulant and hallucinogenic drug that can cause stroke and heart attack...

- **GHB**
  GHB (gamma-hydroxybutyrate) is an illegal drug that acts as a nervous system depressant. It is also called grievous bodily harm (GBH) or fantasy. GHB is highly addictive. It produces feelings of...

- **Hallucinogens**
  Hallucinogens target specific centres of the brain to alter its understanding of sensory input...

- **Heroin**
  Heroin is a depressant of the central nervous system, which means it slows down brain function and particularly the control of breathing...

- **Ice**
  The drug ice, is a stimulant with a high risk of addiction if it used regularly...

- **Inhalants**
  Inhalants are chemical substances that give off fumes that can be breathed in to achieve a 'high'...

- **Kava**
  It is dangerous to take kava in combination with alcohol or other psychoactive drugs...

- **Synthetic drugs (new psychoactive substances)**
  Synthetic drugs aim to mimic the effects of existing illicit drugs such as cannabis, cocaine and ecstasy...

### Health effects of drugs

- **Drug overdose**
  Alcohol, medications, illegal drugs and some herbal remedies can all cause damage if an overdose is taken...

- **How drugs affect your body**
  Drugs affect your body’s central nervous system. They affect how you think, feel and behave...

- **Pregnancy - medication, drugs and alcohol**
  Most women take a drug of some kind during pregnancy, sometimes without realising the potential for harm...

- **Substance abuse and mental illness – dual diagnosis**
  Dual diagnosis means someone has both a mental illness and a substance use problem...

- **Teeth and drug use**
  Many drugs, both prescription and illegal, can cause tooth damage...

- **Teeth and medication**
  Many drugs, both prescription and illegal, can cause tooth damage...

### Minimising harm

- **Partying safely**
  It is important to create a safe environment at parties so that everyone can have fun. Staying safe means avoiding injury or assault, not hurting anyone else, and not ruining an event or...

- **Partying safely - schoolies week**
  Partying at schoolies week can be fun, but you need to be aware of the risks, which can include accidents, robbery, violence and sexual assault...

- **Talking to kids about drugs**
  All children are eventually exposed to drugs – prescription medication, alcohol and tobacco, and sometimes illegal drugs too – or to messages about drugs...

### Getting help for addiction

betterhealth.vic.gov.au
Alcohol and drug treatments and programs

Counsellors, doctors and other healthcare professionals can help if you have a problem with alcohol or drugs...

Assessing your alcohol and drug use

If you are worried about your alcohol or drug use or, call DirectLine on 1800 888 236 for counselling, information and referral, or speak with your local doctor...

Heroin dependence - medication treatments

Medication treatments for heroin dependence include methadone, buprenorphine and naltrexone...

Substance dependency services

Some people need to explore different treatment options for drug dependency before they find what works for them...

Talking to health professionals about drugs, alcohol or addiction

Talking with your doctor or healthcare professional is an important step in getting care for issues of drug or alcohol addiction or dependence...

Related Information

How drugs affect your body

Drugs affect your body’s central nervous system. They affect how you think, feel and behave...

Teeth and drug use

Many drugs, both prescription and illegal, can cause tooth damage...

Teeth and medication

Many drugs, both prescription and illegal, can cause tooth damage...

Epilepsy - first aid and safety

Good seizure management is an important part of reducing the risks associated with epilepsy...

Allergic reactions emergency first aid

Severe allergic reactions (anaphylaxis) and asthma attacks need urgent emergency first aid. In an emergency, always call triple zero (000)...

Support Groups

Family Drug Help

Content Partner

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by: Alcohol and Drug Foundation

betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Last updated: August 2014

Page content currently being reviewed.

Content on this website is provided for information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not in any way endorse or support such therapy, service, product or treatment and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. The information and materials contained on this website are not intended to constitute a comprehensive guide concerning all aspects of the therapy, product or treatment described on the website. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions and to ascertain whether the particular therapy, service, product or treatment described on the website is suitable in their circumstances. The State of Victoria and the Department of Health &
Human Services shall not bear any liability for reliance by any user on the materials contained on this website.

NURSE-ON-CALL

Provides immediate, expert health advice from a registered nurse. Call 1300 60 60 24

Service Search

Find services near you

Service: Select a service
Location: 

Type a minimum of three characters then press UP or DOWN on the keyboard to navigate the autocompleted search results

Eg. Melbourne or 3000

Find a service

Recent Activity

7 people have watched a video today

- **Health topics**
  - Conditions and treatments
  - Healthy living
  - Services and support

- **Explore**
  - Recipes
  - Healthy pantry
  - Videos
  - Consumer medicine information
  - Multilingual health information - Health Translations Directory

- **About**
  - About us
  - Accessibility
  - Content partners
  - Privacy
  - Terms of use
  - Contact us

- **Connect with us**
  - Facebook
  - Twitter
  - YouTube

Page last reviewed: 30 Aug 2014


betterhealth.vic.gov.au