Overdose - what to do in an emergency

Summary

- When a person overdoses they need immediate help.
- Call triple zero (000) for ambulance or police in an emergency.
- Call counselling and crisis services such as Lifeline on 13 11 14 or DirectLine on 1800 888 236 for confidential help and advice.
- Police do not routinely attend overdose emergencies so call for urgent medical attention as soon as possible.

Misuse of alcohol or drugs can quickly lead to an emergency or crisis situation. If someone you know needs help, call triple zero (000) immediately.

Identifying overdose warning signs

If a person is physically unwell or unconscious, call 000 and ask for an ambulance. If you think they may harm themselves or others, ask for the police. Police do not routinely attend alcohol poisoning or drug overdose emergencies.

If a person is experiencing an alcohol or drug overdose they need urgent medical attention. Emergency phone operators are trained to help you and can provide advice about what you need to do while you're waiting for emergency services to arrive.

Drug overdose symptoms

Symptoms of a drug overdose or alcohol poisoning can include:

- severe stomach pain
- difficulty breathing
- seizures
- chest pain
- vomiting
- loss of coordination
- unresponsive, but awake
- limp body
- pale or clammy face
- agitation
- paranoia
- bluish fingernails or lips
- shallow or erratic breathing, or not breathing at all
- slow or erratic pulse (heartbeat)
- choking sounds or a gurgling noise
- loss of consciousness.

What to expect during the call to triple zero (000) – ambulance

When you call triple zero (000), you will be asked which service you require. Tell the operator that you need an ambulance. They will transfer you to an ambulance operator.

Give your phone number and the address where the injured or sick person is. If you are on a country property, you
will need to know your property fire map reference, or VicRoads map reference.

Describe the problem and what has happened, how many people are involved, the injured person’s age and sex and if they are conscious or breathing.

The operator will send an ambulance while you are talking on the phone, even though you may not hear them do this. Keep answering their questions as this will help prepare the paramedics while they are on their way. The operator may give you first aid instructions over the phone. Do not hang up until the phone operator tells you to.

**What to expect during the call to triple zero (000) – police**

When you call triple zero (000), you will be asked which service you require. Tell the operator that you need the police. They will transfer you to a police operator.

The police will want to know where you are. Give your phone number and the address where the concerned person is. If it is on a country property, you will need to know your property fire map reference, or VicRoads map reference.

Describe the problem and what has happened, how many people are involved and the concerned person’s age and sex.

Once the police have this information they will be able to organise help. The operator may give you instructions over the phone. Do not hang up until the phone operator tells you to.

**The emergency department at a hospital**

Treatment for a drug overdose or alcohol poisoning starts as soon as the person arrives at the emergency department. On arrival, they see a specialist emergency nurse called the triage nurse. The triage nurse assesses how serious their condition is. In Australia, the triage system is used to guide hospital staff to see patients according to how sick they are.

This system allows patients with life-threatening problems to be seen first.

In general, the triage system has five levels:

- Level 1 – immediate: life-threatening
- Level 2 – emergency: could become life-threatening
- Level 3 – urgent: not life-threatening
- Level 4 – semi-urgent: not life-threatening
- Level 5 – non-urgent: needs treatment when time permits.

**Patient assessment and treatment**

An emergency department staff member will call the person needing attention and may:

- reassess their condition
- ask questions
- examine them
- discuss their health issue and any tests or treatments that might be required.

If the person can be treated in the department, the emergency staff will treat them. They may also suggest treatment at home or by their local doctor. If the problem is more serious or requires special care, they may be admitted into the hospital.

**Things to tell the emergency department staff**

The emergency department staff may not be aware of the person’s health history, so they may ask you for as many details as you can provide.

To help the staff to assess and treat the person, you will need to tell them about:

- any alcohol or other drugs taken
- any health problems (existing or past)
• all of the medication currently taken and how much
• any treatments currently being undertaken
• any allergies
• any related family health history
• any recent trips overseas
• a current pregnancy or if the person is currently breastfeeding
• any other facts the emergency department staff should know about.

Getting help for alcohol and other drug problems

There are many telephone alcohol and drug helplines dedicated to helping people in trouble. Whether you are in crisis or can see a crisis approaching, the following services can help with professional counselling and advice as well as referral to further treatment:

• **Lifeline** is a 24-hour crisis support and suicide prevention telephone hotline. Call **13 11 14** to talk to a trained counsellor.

• **DirectLine** is Victoria’s 24-hour drug and alcohol counselling service. Call **1800 888 236** for confidential alcohol and drug counselling and referrals.

• **Youth Drug and Alcohol Advice (YoDAA)** is Victoria’s drug and alcohol counselling service specifically for young people and people concerned about a young person with a substance abuse problem. Call **1800 458 685** (9am – 8pm weekdays) to speak to one of YoDAA’s specialist alcohol and drug counsellors. They can offer advice over the phone or help you find more information.

• **Family Drug Help** is a Victorian service for people concerned about a relative or friend using alcohol or other drugs. Call the 24-hour service on **1300 660 068**. It is staffed by volunteers and professional counsellors with experience of alcohol and other drug issues within their family.

• **Pharmacotherapy, Advocacy, Mediation & Support (PAMS)** provide advice for anyone experiencing trouble with their pharmacotherapy program (e.g. methadone, suboxone). Call **1800 443 844** between 10 am to 6 pm, Monday to Friday.

• **Naloxone programs for opioid overdose** – Opioids (such as oxycodone, morphine, heroin, codeine and methadone) are central nervous system depressants. When the body is unable to tolerate the amount of drug administered a person will stop breathing (respiratory depression). Without intervention, an opioid overdose is likely to result in death.

Naloxone is a lifesaving medication that can reverse the effects of an opioid overdose. Naloxone programs involve training potential overdose witnesses (e.g. people who use opioids, their friends and families) in overdose response (including naloxone administration). Unlike other jurisdictions, Victoria has a number of established naloxone programs.

• **Community Overdose Prevention and Education (COPE)** initiative focusses on increasing awareness of the availability and use of naloxone to GPs, pharmacists, other health workers, drug users and their families.

• **Drug Overdose Prevention Education (DOPE)** program focusses on training people who use drugs in basic life support skills, so that they can help someone who has overdosed until an ambulance arrives. In addition to the training, participants are provided with a voucher that they can swap for naloxone at a pharmacy.

Since 1 February 2016 Naloxone has been listed as a Schedule 3 medication (over the counter medication). This means that individuals no longer need a doctor’s prescription in order to access the medication.

Where to get help

• In an emergency call triple zero (000) for an ambulance
• **DirectLine** Tel: **1800 888 236**
• **Pharmacotherapy, Advocacy, Mediation & Support (PAMS)** Tel: **1800 443 844**
• **Youth Drug and Alcohol Advice (YoDAA)** Tel: **1800 458 685**
• **Family Drug Help** Tel: **1300 660 068**
• **Lifeline** Tel: **13 11 14**
