

Opioid Use Disorder

Opioid use disorder, or opioid addiction, is a chronic disease that affects millions of Americans. While heroin addiction has affected many Americans for decades, there has been more attention on the opioid epidemic in recent years due to rise in opioid overdose deaths and spread of heroin to parts of the country that did not have it. The first phase of the opioid epidemic started in the 1990s and was due to prescription opioids (like oxycodone); the second phase was due largely to heroin; and the current phase is due to illegal fentanyl.

Myths and Misconceptions

Myth #1: Anyone who takes prescription opioids for pain has an opioid addiction.

Fact: Addiction is defined by loss of control, compulsive use and continued use despite harm. Many patients take opioid medications as prescribed and are not addicted.

Myth #2: Most overdose deaths are due to prescriptions opioids.

Fact: Since 2013, most opioid overdose deaths in the U.S. are due to fentanyl, a very strong synthetic opioid that is mixed into heroin and other drugs.

Myth #3: Taking a medication for opioid use disorder, like buprenorphine or methadone, is just substituting one addiction for another.

Fact: While these medications still cause a physical dependence and patients experience physical withdrawal when they stop taking them, this does not mean that someone is addicted if they are taking it as prescribed by their doctor. (Remember the “3 Cs” of addiction.)

Treatment for Opioid Use Disorder

Opioid use disorder (OUD) can be a devastating disease when untreated. Fortunately, effective treatment is available.

There are three approved medications for OUD:

- 1) Buprenorphine (commonly known by brand-name Suboxone)
- 2) Methadone
- 3) Naltrexone

Buprenorphine and **methadone** are both safe, long-acting opioid medications that treat cravings and withdrawal from opioids and help someone with opioid addiction feel normal. When given at the right doses, these medications do not make you high.

Naltrexone, also known by brand name Vivitrol, is a once-a-month injection that blocks opioids from working. People receiving naltrexone cannot take other opioids (including for pain).

Because opioid use disorder is a chronic disease, like diabetes or high blood pressure, it requires long-term treatment. Many patients with opioid use disorder need to stay on medications like buprenorphine or methadone for many years. This is safe to do. Each person with opioid addiction is unique, and different people do different combinations of treatment – some without medication and some with. Whatever treatment helps someone stop using drugs and live a healthy life is the best treatment for that person. Support groups like Narcotics Anonymous (NA) and therapy are also helpful for many people in recovery.

