

Prescribing Naloxone to Prevent Overdose Deaths: What Medical Professionals Need to Know

What is naloxone?

Naloxone (brand name Narcan) is an opioid antagonist medication that blocks the effects of opioid drugs by interfering with their uptake at opioid receptors in the brain, rapidly reversing the respiratory depression that is the fatal factor in an opioid overdoseⁱ. It can be administered through intramuscular injection or an intranasal spray that is absorbed through vasculature in the nasal cavity. It is standard practice for emergency personnel to give this medication when summoned to the scene of an overdose and it can also be administered safely by laypeople. It is currently available only by prescription. In 2012, the American Medical Association passed a resolution encouraging the establishment of naloxone distribution programs.

Is opioid overdose a problem in New Jersey?

Drug overdose is the leading cause of accidental death in New Jersey, surpassing even car accidents. The *Overdose Prevention Act*, which was signed by Governor Christie in May of 2013, is part of a public health strategy to curtail the alarming rate of overdose deaths in our state.

What does the *Overdose Prevention Act (OPA)* do?

The *OPA* provides protections from civil and criminal liability to health care professionals who prescribe and dispense naloxone and to laypeople who administer itⁱⁱ. The law also encourages overdose victims and witnesses to call 911 in overdose emergencies by providing immunity from arrest and prosecution for drug possession charges to those who seek medical assistance in good faith.

Under what parameters can a physician prescribe naloxone in New Jersey?

Under the *OPA*, health care professionals can prescribe or dispense naloxone to any person who is at risk for opioid overdose and to those who may be in a position to help someone who is experiencing an overdose. This extends access to naloxone to people who may be in the best position to intervene in an overdose emergency, including family members and peers of those who are struggling with addiction. Patients must simply be given information about opioid overdose prevention and recognition, how to perform rescue breathing and resuscitation, naloxone dosage and administration, the importance of calling 911 in overdose situations, and caring for the overdose victim after the administration of naloxone.

Is there abuse potential with naloxone?

Naloxone has no addictive or psychoactive properties and few side effectsⁱⁱⁱ. It has no effect on people who do not have opioids in their system. People who are using opioids may experience withdrawal symptoms when given naloxone, particularly if higher doses are administered. However, these withdrawal symptoms, though unpleasant, are not life threatening while the respiratory depression that occurs in opioid overdose is fatal without prompt medical attention.^{iv}

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Do other states have similar laws?

Yes. As of May 2014, nineteen other states, Virginia, California, Connecticut, Illinois, Massachusetts, New Mexico, New York, Rhode Island, North Carolina, Oregon, Colorado, Kentucky, Maryland, Vermont, Oklahoma, Ohio, Washington State, Georgia, Maine, as well as the District of Columbia, have enacted similar laws encouraging expanded access to naloxone to prevent overdose deaths^v.

What about first responders?

It is important that all first responders, including police and emergency medical technicians (EMTs), are able to administer naloxone if they are first to arrive at the scene of an overdose emergency. Police in Ocean County are now being trained to do so through a program sponsored by the Ocean County Prosecutor's Office and have already saved multiple lives. The Office of the Attorney General is finalizing a standard protocol to guide police departments as similar programs spread throughout the state. The Christie administration issued a waiver signed by Health Commissioner O'Dowd that adds naloxone administration into the scope of practice for EMTs.

What can individual physicians in New Jersey do to help?

Physicians can prescribe naloxone to any patient who is at risk for opioid overdose and to those who may be in a position to help a family member, friend or peer during an overdose. This may include patients with histories of drug abuse or addiction as well as those who are prescribed opioid medications for pain or other medical conditions. A prescription for naloxone along with information about overdose prevention should be provided along with any prescription for opioid medications. This should also be provided to overdose survivors upon discharge from hospital emergency departments.

Where can I get more information about naloxone?

For more information and additional resources about overdose prevention in New Jersey, please visit our website: <http://www.drugpolicy.org/njodinfo>

ⁱ UNODC/WHO. (2013, June). *Opioid Overdose: Preventing and Reducing Opioid Overdose Mortality*. Retrieved from <https://www.unodc.org/docs/treatment/overdose.pdf>

ⁱⁱ N.J.S.A. 24:6J-1 et seq. Retrieved from http://www.njleg.state.nj.us/2012/Bills/AL13/46_PDF

ⁱⁱⁱ Burris, S., Beletsky, L., Castagna, C., Coyle, C., Crowe, C., & McLaughlin, J.M. (2009). Stopping an invisible epidemic: Legal issues in the provision of naloxone to prevent opioid overdose. *Drexel Law Review*, 1 (2), 273-339. Retrieved from http://prescribeto prevent.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/burris_stoppinga_ninvisibleepidemic.pdf

^{iv} University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority (2011). *Health Facts for You: Opioid Withdrawal*. Retrieved from <https://www.uwhealth.org/healthfacts/alcoholandotherdrugabuse/7266.pdf>

^v Davis, C. (2013, November 1). *Legal Interventions to Reduce Overdose Mortality: Naloxone Access and Overdose Good Samaritan Laws*. The Network for Public Health Law. Retrieved from https://www.networkforphl.org/_asset/qz5pvn/network-naloxone-10-4.pdf