

# Let's talk about Rx use—what is an opioid?

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Credit: University of Colorado at Boulder

There are many reasons someone may take a prescription medication. We know these prescriptions are only safe when taken as directed by a medical professional for a specific health purpose, but for those who still choose to use outside of these conditions, there are some things to be aware of.

Whether you've heard about the [opioid](#) crisis, are concerned about a friend or just want to know more about prescription use and safety, here are the basics.

## What is an opioid?

There's a lot of coverage in the media right now on opioid use in our country. It's important to know what opioids actually are, where they come from and what the risks of use include.

Opioids are drugs derived from opium, also called opiates. Opioids include semi-synthetic and synthetic opiates, which include illicit drugs such as heroin, fentanyl and carfentanyl. Opioids also include prescription pain medications, such as morphine, hydrocodone and oxycodone (Oxycontin).

Opioid overdoses can be fatal and difficult to predict. The best prevention is to avoid opioid use unless explicitly prescribed to you with specific instructions by a [medical professional](#). However, if someone still chooses to use, noting the factors that can contribute to an overdose may help save a life.

## Types of other prescription medications

Safety and risks with prescription medications depends on the type of medication in use. It's good to be aware of the associated effects with each.

- Depressants are medications such as Xanax and Oxycontin, which can create feelings of sedation in users. They can also slow down or stop breathing.
- Stimulants are medications such as Adderall, which activate the

body's systems and increase heart rate, blood pressure and breathing. They can also create feelings of alertness.

Mixing any of these with other substances, including alcohol, can seriously increase the risk of negative effects and can be fatal in some cases. It is illegal to use prescription medications that were prescribed to someone else; doing so also may increase the risk of [negative effects](#), as the actual contents of the medication are unknown to the user.

To keep yourself, others and the environment safe, safely dispose of any unused [prescription medication](#) in the safe disposal box at the CU Boulder Police Department.

## Risk factors for overdose

- **Quality.** Substance potency varies substantially and may be cut with dangerous, high-potency opioids.
- **Mixing.** Mixing opioids, in particular, with alcohol or other medications such as benzodiazepines can slow the respiratory system and stop breathing.
- **Tolerance.** Tolerance decreases after periods without use including detoxification, hospitalization or if a person resumes use after recovery.
- **Environment.** Using in isolated environments decreases the likelihood of someone being able to help in an overdose situation.
- **Health problems.** Underlying health problems, especially [chronic lung diseases](#) such as emphysema or sleep apnea, can slow the respiratory system—even when the user is not aware they may have these underlying health problems.

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

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