

US surgeon general urges Americans to carry opioid antidote

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The top US doctor on Thursday urged more Americans to carry naloxone, an antidote to opioid overdose, as the nation grapples with a surge in deaths due to potent prescription painkillers and heroin.

US Surgeon General Jerome Adams urged people who struggle with opioid abuse and their family members and friends to obtain naloxone from a pharmacy, and learn to use it in case of emergency.

"Increasing the availability and targeted distribution of naloxone is a critical component of our efforts to reduce opioid-related overdose deaths and, when combined with the availability of effective treatment, to ending the opioid epidemic," Adams said in a statement.

"In most states, people who are or who know someone at risk for opioid overdose can go to a pharmacy or community-based program, to get trained on naloxone administration, and receive naloxone by 'standing order,' ie, without a patient-specific prescription."

Naloxone, if given in time, can revive a person whose breathing has slowed or stopped due to an overdose.

It is already widely carried by emergency responders responding to crisis calls.

More than 64,000 people died of drug overdose in 2016 in the United States, with the sharpest increase among deaths related to fentanyl, a

synthetic opioid that is often mixed with heroin.

According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, overdose deaths from prescription and illicit opioids doubled from 21,089 in 2010 to 42,249 in 2016.

'Significant moment'

In an op-ed also published Thursday, Adams praised President Donald Trump's call last week for an end to America's epidemic of opioid abuse.

Trump championed the death penalty for drug dealers, pledged to cut the supply of illicit drugs and reduce over-prescribing practices.

"His announcement marks a significant moment in our national effort to reverse the deadly trends we have seen for the past several years, and a recognition that communities all across America are suffering from this crisis," Adams said.

"The government-funding bill signed last week by President Trump doubles the amount of funding that the US Department of Health and Human Services provides through targeted grants to each state for opioid addiction prevention, treatment, and recovery support," he added.

An estimated 2.4 million Americans are addicted to opioids, a class of drugs that include prescription painkillers, as well as heroin.

Each day, 115 Americans die from overdoses, according to the government-funded National Institutes of Health.

Adams, who revealed that his own brother has struggled with addiction for years, said stigma may be a reason why more people don't already have naloxone in their possession.

However, critics say the cost is also a factor.

Naloxone, known widely as Narcan, was first approved by the US Food and Drug Administration in 1971.

Formulations are available as injections or a nasal spray, but are sold by only a few companies that have hiked rates significantly in recent years, a drug company trend seen industry wide.

The cheapest injection is about \$40 per dose, but easier-to-use formulations are even more costly, with Narcan at \$150 for two nasal-spray doses and a two-dose Evzio package priced at about \$4,000 today, up from \$690 in 2014.

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