

Opioid Unintentional Overdoses

Ashland County

A.C.C.A.D.A. – Dennis Dyer – written 2016

Our community is increasingly concerned about the risk of overdose on heroin and other opiate drugs. According to the Ashland County Coroner's Office, 5 persons died of unintentional drug overdose in 2015. Six died in 2014. Of those who died in 2014-15 (11), two were from heroin use only and one died from cocaine only. Ten of the 11 had opiate drugs in their bodies along with other drugs.

The term opioid refers to substances that are derived from the opiate poppy and processed into legal and illegal drugs. There are also synthetic opioids such as Fentanyl. Heroin is an opioid drug that is synthesized from morphine, a naturally occurring substance extracted from the seed pod of the Asian opium poppy plant. A number of commonly prescribed painkillers such as codeine, Vicodin and Percocet are opioids.

Anyone needing services for a substance use disorder should contact A.C.C.A.D.A. (Ashland County Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse) at 419-289-7675

A.C.C.A.D.A. provides outpatient treatment and supports recovering addicts in their recovery. A.C.C.A.D.A. has been offering medication-assisted treatment to opiate addicts for several years. After referring to a qualified doctor we provide treatment on an outpatient basis. We have begun to assist clients to access a promising new treatment drug called Vivitrol. No medication is a panacea for addiction but medications can aid in the individuals personal recovery.

Area EMTs have been using a drug called naloxone (brand name Narcan) to reverse overdose and save lives. The County Health Department has secured a grant to promote the use of Narcan. The medication is available through the County Health Department and the UH – Samaritan pharmacy. Most area pharmacies have not yet stocked it. Chief Marcelli of the Ashland Police Department recently stated he plans to begin issuing Narcan to his patrol officers.

The following information is mostly developed from clinical observation. Other information was provided by the Coroner's Office and other public bodies.

Those who have addicts in their families may want to have naloxone (Narcan) on hand to deal with an overdose. When a person survives an overdose they will hopefully seek help and move into recovery.

In some cases an adult child is living at home and not using – which means their tolerance to opiates is low. Having Narcan in the house could save a life. After a period of not using opiates the physiological dependence on the drug has waned and their tolerance for the drug is low. At the height of use they may have been using ½ to 1 gram of heroin a day. If they relapse and use opiates, they may mistakenly take a higher amount than they can tolerate. This may lead to overdose and death. When a person is in early recovery from opiate addiction they experience urges to use and may begin to obsessively think about using again. At this point they are vulnerable to overdose. Unfortunately any use in this situation carries a higher than normal risk of overdose. The producers of Narcan advise that use of Narcan should not be a substitute for emergency medical treatment. The Narcan may initially be needed to be repeated as it wears off. Interested persons may want to look at the Narcan video at www.narcannasalspray.com. UH – Samaritan pharmacy reported stocking Narcan (Naloxone) for \$90.

Ohio recently passed H.B. 110 which is referred to as the 911 Good Samaritan law. The law grants immunity to callers and to the person overdosing on heroin, opioids or other drugs from arrest, charging, prosecution, conviction and penalization for a minor drug possession offense. The law takes effect in mid-September.

Another way a person can overdose is to inject an unexpected high purity dose of heroin. The supply of heroin is subject to the supply and demand forces of the heroin market. Dealers compete in a market for customers for their product. Heroin addicts seek the highest strength product that they can find. In many cases the user is withdrawal sick about ½ of the time and desperately wants high strength heroin at a cheap price. Many get such a high tolerance when using daily that they are hardly able to get high anymore. They use in order to not be sick. The seller (drug dealer) may also try to enhance his product by adding other drugs in order to gain customers and maintain regular buyers. The sale of heroin, of course, is a totally unregulated market. Unlike the pharmacies and drug companies, there is no quality assurance process and no accurate strength or purity labels such as we even see with over the counter medications.

What this means is the purity/strength of the heroin is unpredictable and the user may unexpectedly encounter a very high purity dose of heroin and overdose. Many are treated and survive while some unfortunately die.

Out the 11 deaths in the last 2 years (2014-2015), eight involved the deceased having multiple drugs in their system. Two of the deaths were heroin only and one was cocaine only. One death was due to Fentanyl only which is a powerful opioid analgesic. A combination of drugs appears to increase the risk of overdose. Alcohol was also present in at least 2 of the deaths.

In some cases, drug dealers mix other drugs into their product to enhance the effect of the heroin. Some users will also take benzodiazepines along with the heroin to boost their high. Some heroin users take benzodiazepines, such as Xanax or Klonopin, along with the heroin to enhance the high. Some users say that the benzodiazepines (anti-anxiety drugs) disinhibit the user and can lead to misjudgments in the amount of heroin injected.

In most cases there was a mix of drugs but 10 of the 11 overdose deaths involved either an opiate painkiller or heroin. One overdosed on cocaine alone.

At A.C.C.A.D.A., we routinely inform clients of the risk for overdose and particularly so for those who have been clean for a period of time. The dilemma is that the individual has to use this information at a particularly perilous moment – that is, when they are embarking on a course of action that is inherently not a logical one. They have decided to use and are seeking a high while not in a particularly guarded state of mind.

A.C.C.A.D.A. is a contract agency of the Mental Health and Recovery Board of Ashland County and a partner agency of the United Way of Ashland.

Dennis Dyer, Licensed Chemical Dependency Counselor – A.C.C.A.D.A. Director