

California Opioid Safety Network Key Strategy: Naloxone Distribution

What is naloxone?

Naloxone is a medication designed to rapidly reverse opioid overdose. It is an opioid antagonist—meaning that it binds to opioid receptors and reverses their effects. It can quickly restore normal respiration to a person whose breathing has slowed or stopped as a result of overdosing with heroin, fentanyl or prescription opioids. Brand names for naloxone include Narcan, Evzio, and others. Naloxone was approved for opioid overdose by the Food and Drug Administration in 1971. Naloxone is safe when given by a lay person, and causes no harm if administered in error.

Why is naloxone distribution an opioid safety strategy?

Opioid overdose is a leading cause of accidental death in California. Nearly all of these events are preventable. Naloxone distribution programs are centered on the principles of harm reduction, which acknowledge that potentially lethal drug use often continues despite prevention and treatment efforts. While treating substance use disorder is the ultimate goal, interventions to reduce the negative consequences of drug use, such as death from overdose, are critical intermediary steps.¹ Research has shown that one life could be saved for every 164 naloxone kits that are distributed.² Naloxone distribution programs protect anyone at risk for an opioid overdose, including users and first responders who may have accidental exposures to high potency opioids in the field.

What are the barriers to distribution?

The two main barriers to naloxone access are the cost (\$75 or more from a typical pharmacy) and the stigma and misconceptions associated with carrying this prevention tool. While naloxone use in general is more widespread than ever, some pharmacies have avoided stocking naloxone, and first responders may be reticent to use or carry it. State officials have also led efforts to make the drug more available and more affordable, or free through reimbursement, and coalitions and community members have made notable progress in getting public support.

What can be done to overcome the barriers?

More education is needed to dispel the misconceptions about naloxone. For example, it does not “enable” opioid addiction ([see this San Joaquin Record article](#)). Training law enforcement, first responders, and community members to use naloxone is gaining acceptance as awareness of this effective, first-line response to preventing opioid overdoses increases.

¹<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3008773/>

²<http://www.washington.edu/news/2012/12/31/study-shows-naloxone-kits-cost-effective-in-preventing-overdose-deaths/>

Key facts:

- The most widely distributed form of naloxone is a safe and easy-to-administer nasal spray covered by most health insurance plans, including Medi-Cal. It also comes in injectable form. Insurance coverage may vary depending on the type of form.³
- Naloxone distribution is a cost-effective way to prevent overdoses, and has been shown to have similar prevention benefits for different at-risk populations regardless of their age or duration of drug use.
- In 2015 Governor Brown signed California’s pharmacy naloxone bill (AB 1535), authorizing pharmacists to furnish naloxone directly without a physician prescription.
- In 2018 CDPH director Karen Smith issued a Statewide Standing Order for naloxone to allow community organizations and other entities in California that are not currently working with a physician to distribute naloxone.⁴
- Between 1996 and June 2014 nearly 27,000 lives were saved in the U.S. as a result of naloxone kits given to friends and family to reverse opioid overdoses.⁵
- Of those rescued with naloxone, about 10% will die within a year from another overdose (though not all from opioid overdoses), which is why follow up treatment and MAT are essential strategies are needed after an overdose.⁶

Anticipated questions:

Does naloxone encourage drug use?

Research has shown that naloxone does not encourage more substance misuse. Some studies have shown experience with naloxone encourages drug users to [decrease](#) their use.

Can naloxone be misused?

No. Naloxone does not get a person “high” or cause euphoria. Naloxone binds to a person’s opioid receptors and can block or reverse the effects of an opioid on a person’s body and brain.

Can naloxone prevent overdoses from all opioids?

Yes. Naloxone reverses the effects of opioids such as heroin, methadone, morphine, opium, codeine, hydrocodone, fentanyl, carfentanil, and others. Opioid overdose can lead to respiratory failure (i.e., discontinued breathing), and naloxone can reverse this effect. However, it does not counter the effect of non-opioid drugs. Multiple naloxone doses may be required when reversing an overdose especially when an overdose is related to highly potent synthetic opioids, such as fentanyl.

³https://www.ddap.pa.gov/overdose/Pages/Naloxone_FAQ.aspx

⁴<https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CCDPHP/DCDIC/SACB/CDPH%20Document%20Library/Naloxone/Naloxone%20FAQs%20062118.pdf>

⁵https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6423a2.htm?s_cid=mm6423a2_e

⁶<https://www.medpagetoday.com/meetingcoverage/acep/68998>



Can anyone legally administer naloxone?

Yes. There is no potential harm in a non-emergency responder administering naloxone to an individual who is believed to be experiencing an overdose. If there are no opioids present in the individual's body, naloxone will have no effect. However, anyone who administers naloxone must also immediately call 911 for medical assistance. Opioid overdose is a medical emergency, and while naloxone may restore normal breathing, patients must be monitored over time to ensure they're stable. Naloxone may also thrust the recipient into potentially painful withdrawal.

Who should carry naloxone?

Naloxone should be co-prescribed to any patient currently using opioids, or a family or household member member of someone currently using opioids. Additionally, community organizations or public institutions such as libraries and schools should carry naloxone, especially in hard-to-reach rural areas.

How do I get naloxone without a prescription?

All pharmacies in California are legally allowed to furnish naloxone without a prescription upon request from a customer. Pharmacies that do not have it in stock can order it, and larger pharmacies, such as CVS, often can get the drug within a day.⁷ Also there are many community organizations which will dispense naloxone for free to individuals. Check out [CDPH's Naloxone Grant Program page](#) for more information.

Is training required to furnish naloxone?

California pharmacists who wish to furnish naloxone must take an hour-long training course. They will learn how to screen patients who may have a sensitivity to the drug, as well as how to educate potential users. Staff of community organizations and other entities distributing naloxone under the statewide standing order are required to receive opioid overdose training, and are required to train individuals who receive naloxone from them.

Resources:

- [CDPH Tools and Resources](#): for Health Departments and Syringe Services Programs.
- [CDPH Statewide Standing Order for Naloxone webpage](#): includes links to the standing order FAQ and the [application](#) for CDPH's naloxone grant program. Can be shared with any community organization interested in distributing naloxone, or already distributing naloxone.
- [Overdose Prevention & Naloxone Manual](#): Harm Reduction Coalition's outlined process for developing and managing an Overdose Prevention and Education Program.
- [Harm Reduction Coalition Syringe Access Implementation Webpage](#): information and policy/advocacy support for communities working to establish, expand or improve effectiveness of syringe access/exchange services.

⁷<https://www.cvs.com/content/prescription-drug-abuse/save-a-life>

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- Naloxone Training Webinars sponsored by [CDPH](#) in partnership with Harm Reduction Coalition:
 - [Part I: Overdose Education and Naloxone Distribution OEND \(webinar recording\)](#)
 - [Part II: Implementing Naloxone Distribution Systems \(webinar recording\)](#)
- [Resources from COSN Naloxone Webinar](#): from Marin Health and Human Services and San Joaquin Public Health – includes examples of protocols, comprehensive plans, and memorandums of understanding.
- [California State Board of Pharmacy Naloxone FAQ](#): answers common questions around naloxone and the laws and protocol that pertain to its use in California, with information that may be useful for pharmacist and prescriber education.
- [“Administering Naloxone” CDPH naloxone training video](#): seeks to equip public health agencies, community organizations, friends, family members and others with the knowledge and skills needed to prevent opioid-related deaths by using naloxone.
- [“The Role of Community Health Centers in Addressing the Opioid Epidemic”](#) Kaiser Family Foundation issue brief – presents findings from a 2018 survey of community health centers on health center activities related to the prevention and treatment of OUD.
- [Naloxoneinfo.org](#): tools intended for anyone starting or running a naloxone program. Includes general education information, studies, materials, and resources for pharmacies, law enforcement, patients, and more.

For additional resources please go to:

<https://californiaopioidsafetynetwork.org/discussionhubs/boots-on-the-ground-opioid-safety-strategy-implementation/tools-and-resources>

