Recovery Alberta

FAQ – General Public

Community-based Naloxone Program

The Community Based Naloxone (CBN) Program distributes naloxone kits to partner organizations that provide them free of charge to the public. CBN partners include community pharmacies, community-based organizations, public and private clinics, hospitals, community health sites and private businesses.

This document answers frequently asked questions (FAQ) about the program and is intended for anyone interested in obtaining a kit or learning more about naloxone and opioid poisoning response. Staff who are providing kits to the public are encouraged to review these questions to answer general questions that may come up when providing someone with a naloxone kit.

What is an opioid?

Opioids are a type of medication usually prescribed for pain relief. There are legal (prescription) and illegal (street-made) opioids; both have the potential to cause a person to experience signs and symptoms of opioid poisoning. Opioid effects include euphoria (intense feelings of pleasure), slowed breathing, slowed heart rate, drowsiness, slurred speech, vomiting, constipation and pupil constriction. Some common prescription opioids include morphine, hydromorphone, oxycodone, Percocet, codeine, fentanyl, methadone and buprenorphine. Some common street names for illegal opioids include fentanyl, fent, down, heroin, H, shady eighties, green beans, beans and pants. Illegal opioids pose a high poisoning risk due to their unpredictable and irregular strength, potential contamination with toxic substances, and unregulated methods of production. Legal (prescription) opioids can also cause poisoning, particularly in combination with other substances that depress the central nervous system like benzodiazepines (e.g., sedatives like Ativan, Xanax or Valium), alcohol and other opioids.

How is poisoning different from overdose?

The terms ‘poisoning’ and ‘overdose’ may be used interchangeably. Both words mean that a substance has been taken in greater amounts than the body can tolerate and puts a person at risk of injury and/or death. Overdose can happen with alcohol, over-the-counter medications, illegal substances or any combination of substances, and can be intentional or accidental. Many people, however, may view all overdoses as intentional, resulting in negative associations with the word and the potential for increased stigma. Poisoning is consuming enough of a hazardous substance (poison) to cause injury, illness or death and is typically viewed as accidental/unintentional. Because the illegal drug supply is unpredictable and has been known to be contaminated with toxic substances in unknown concentrations, the more accurate term for accidental overdose is poisoning.

What is naloxone?

Naloxone is a medication that temporarily reverses opioid poisoning by stopping opioid effects. Opioid poisoning can cause a person's breathing to slow or stop and may result in loss of consciousness. Naloxone is a medication that temporarily reverses these effects so the person can breathe normally and regain consciousness. Naloxone does not reverse the effects of non-opioid drugs and would not work on poisonings due to stimulants (e.g., crystal meth, cocaine, ecstasy, GHB or alcohol) or benzodiazepines (e.g., Ativan, Xanax, Valium). However, if a person experiences a poisoning due to multiple substances, including opioids, naloxone will help by temporarily reversing the effects of the opioid. Naloxone does not get a person intoxicated (stoned or high) and will have no negative effects on someone who has not used opioids.

A person receiving a dose of naloxone may slip back into a poisoning after the naloxone has worn off. This is because the effects of opioids often last longer than naloxone. Naloxone may work for 20 to 90 minutes and then the person may experience poisoning again if there are still opioids in their body that they are unable to tolerate. Someone receiving naloxone should be monitored for up to 90 minutes after being given naloxone to ensure that they do not go back into a poisoned state. This is why it is so important to call 911 if someone is experiencing opioid poisoning.

How does naloxone work?

Both naloxone and opioids bind to the same receptors in the nervous system. However, naloxone has a stronger attraction to these receptors than opioids, allowing it to bump the opioids off the receptors, and reverse their effects. Naloxone acts fast (within 2 minutes) and lasts for 20 to 90 minutes. It is temporary and does not last as long as opioids typically do, which is why monitoring and support after giving someone naloxone is critical. The body will have broken down some of the opioids over time, but naloxone does not destroy the opioids. It is always important to call 911 when someone experiences poisoning, as they may experience poisoning again once the naloxone wears off and opioids bind to the receptors.

What is a community-based naloxone kit?

A community-based naloxone kit may also be known as an overdose response kit or naloxone kit. It is a small portable kit containing materials that can be used to respond to opioid poisoning in the community. Each kit contains:

- 3 vials of naloxone (each vial is 1 dose)
- 3 safety syringes
- 3 alcohol pads
- 1 pair of rubber gloves
- 1 barrier mask (for rescue breathing)
- An information pamphlet explaining how to respond to opioid poisoning with naloxone

Who can get a community-based naloxone kit?

Anyone, especially those who are at risk of witnessing or experiencing poisoning can get a naloxone kit for free at many community sites and pharmacies across the province of Alberta. This includes people who take prescription or non-prescription (street) drugs, family, friends or community members. You do not need to prove your risk to receive a kit. It is free to any member of the public as part of the publicly funded Community Based Naloxone Program.

How can someone get a community-based naloxone kit?

Any member of the public can get a kit through many pharmacies, clinics, community programs, emergency departments and urgent care centres that are registered partners of the Community Based Naloxone Program. To find a location near you, visit Get Naloxone. It is recommended to call the location first to ensure they have kits available.

Is training mandatory to receive a community-based naloxone kit?

Training is not mandatory to receive a kit. However, it should always be offered and is recommended for anyone receiving a kit. It takes approximately 10 minutes to complete. Training can be provided face-to-face by the kit provider, which could be a health care professional or community provider, if they have completed the training to do so. There are also educational videos, a self-guided learning module, and other resources available on recoveryalberta.ca/getnaloxone.

Why should I complete training before I use a naloxone kit?

It is best to complete training before you have to use the kit in a suspected poisoning to ensure you respond safely and appropriately. Responding to a poisoning can be overwhelming if you don't know what you are dealing with, or how to respond appropriately in an emergency. Knowing how to spot a poisoning, and how to respond, including how to give rescue breaths and naloxone, can help keep someone alive while waiting for Emergency Medical Services to arrive. Training prepares you to:

- Reduce opioid poisoning risk
- Recognize opioid poisoning
- Understand the importance of calling 911
- Provide rescue breathing
- Prepare and administer a naloxone injection
- Place someone in the recovery position
- Support the person and yourself after the incident.

How is naloxone given and what if I am uncomfortable with giving an injection?

Community based naloxone kits contain naloxone that is given by intramuscular (IM) injection. It is injected into a large muscle, preferably the middle outer thigh or upper arm

(deltoid) muscle. Safety syringes are provided to prevent needlestick injuries. If you are uncomfortable with giving an injection, tell the person providing you with a kit so they may spend extra training time to demonstrate how to use the syringe, so you feel more comfortable. There is a nasal spray formulation of naloxone available, branded as NARCAN® Nasal Spray in Canada. The nasal spray is not publicly funded but may be another option for those who want to have naloxone for personal use, but do not feel comfortable with injection. If you are not comfortable with giving naloxone, remember that the most important thing you can do to help someone who is in a state of suspected poisoning is to call 911 and, if safe to do so, provide rescue breaths as needed.

Where can I find more information about nasal spray naloxone?

The nasal spray formulation of naloxone, known as NARCAN® Nasal Spray or Teva-Naloxone Nasal Spray, can be purchased from community pharmacies. It is recommended you call ahead of time to check availability. NARCAN® is listed as an open benefit under the Department of Indigenous Services Canada's Non-Insured Health Benefits Program. It is also covered by Veterans Affairs Canada Program of Choice 10 – Prescription Drugs, for those who are eligible. You may wish to speak with your pharmacist to find out more about nasal spray naloxone.

Can naloxone cause harm or be misused?

Naloxone is a very safe drug and has been authorized for use in Canada for over 50 years. Additionally, it is listed as an essential medicine by the World Health Organization. Naloxone has no effect on someone who has no opioids in their system as it only works to block/reverse the effects of opioids. It does not cause anyone to feel high or intoxicated. For people who are dependent on opioids, naloxone may cause them to go into withdrawal, which they may experience as pain, muscle aches/cramping, agitation, anxiety, nausea/vomiting, diarrhea, runny nose and watery eyes, dilated pupils, and chills. When giving naloxone to someone dependent on opioids, only give what is necessary and wait 2 to 3 minutes between doses to allow the naloxone effects to set in. Always remember to call 911 and provide rescue breaths between doses if the person is not breathing, and it is safe to do so. Very rarely, a person may be aware that they are hypersensitive or allergic to naloxone. In these scenarios, it is best to consider the risk of not giving naloxone and ensure that 911 is called immediately for ongoing care.

Is naloxone safe to give during pregnancy?

Well-controlled human studies have not been done on naloxone use in pregnancy. Naloxone should be given cautiously in pregnancy and only if clearly needed (i.e., the person is unresponsive, not breathing and/or has no pulse). Always call 911 and follow the operator's direction for any suspected poisoning during pregnancy.

Is naloxone safe to give to children or youth?

Yes! It is safe to give naloxone to children and youth. The standard dose that the CBN Program uses is for anyone aged 1 year and older. As with adults, 911 should be called anytime naloxone is given to a child or youth so that continued medical support can be provided.

Do you have to be a medical professional to recognize opioid poisoning and inject naloxone?

No. Anyone can recognize opioid poisoning and give naloxone after receiving training. Research and experience show that if people are given basic training, they can recognize opioid poisoning and administer naloxone safely and effectively. Naloxone kits are for members of the public to use to respond to opioid poisonings in the community. Appropriate training should be offered with any kit to ensure the person receiving it knows how to use it correctly.

Can someone who has experienced stimulant poisoning be given naloxone?

Naloxone will not reverse a stimulant (e.g., crack/cocaine or crystal meth) poisoning; it only reverses the effects of opioid poisoning. If a person experiences poisoning due to polysubstance use (mixing different drugs) that includes opioids, naloxone may help by reversing the effect of only the opioid that was taken. However, this may not change how the person appears. Naloxone will have no effect on someone who has no opioids in their system. Stimulant poisoning is dangerous and is a complicated medical emergency. Call 911 immediately and follow the operator's directions for response.

Is expired naloxone effective?

Like most medications, naloxone will start to lose its effectiveness after the expiry date. However, it may still be stable and effective enough to reverse opioid poisoning if it is the only naloxone available and can be used safely. Remember to perform rescue breathing as part of your response as well, if you are safe to do so. It is important to replace your naloxone kit as soon as you use it or when it is out of date. Expiry dates can be found on the label on the outside of the kit (on the back) and on the side of the naloxone vials. You may return expired naloxone vials to any pharmacy for appropriate disposal and to obtain a replacement kit.

How should naloxone be stored?

Naloxone should be stored away from light and between 15 to 30°Celsius. It has been known to freeze in extreme cold. Naloxone can remain stable after being frozen and thawed, as well as during extreme heat cycles, however, it is always best to store the medication as recommended for optimal efficacy. Vials can be removed from the kit and kept close to the body (in clothing pockets) for those who carry kits and are outdoors for long periods of time in the winter. Avoid storing naloxone kits in backpacks or cars in

extreme weather. Replace your kits immediately when you know they have been out of the appropriate temperature range. However, kits stored outside the temperature range still have some effectiveness so they can be used if no other kit is available.

How should I dispose of my naloxone kit?

The different parts of the naloxone kit are to be disposed of as follows:

- The case (black zippered container), barrier mask, alcohol pads and gloves may be discarded in your household or industrial garbage bins – they are considered general waste.
- Syringes may be discarded in a sharps disposal or biohazard container, which may be found in some public areas, health care settings, or purchased from community pharmacies. You may also make your own container using a hard plastic container with a narrow opening and secure cover (e.g., a bleach bottle, milk jug, large water bottle). Ensure you label your container explicitly (e.g., SHARPS or NEEDLES). These containers can be returned to some community pharmacies, Eco Stations, harm reduction organizations that collect sharps, or Fire Departments. For more information on sharps disposal in your area, call your local municipality, city services at 311 or community and social resources information at 211.
- Empty or expired vials of naloxone can be returned to some community pharmacies for safe disposal. If no other means are available, they may be discarded in a sharps disposal container.

What do I do if I have used my community-based naloxone kit?

Replace your kit at a pharmacy or community provider near you. Visit recoveryalberta.ca/getnaloxone to find a site near you.

Do I need to let anyone know that I used my naloxone kit?

If you have responded to a suspected opioid poisoning and used your community-based naloxone kit, you should let Emergency Medical Services know that you have done so when they arrive. Keep your kit and vials at the scene of the incident so that they can see how much you have given. If you have any negative experiences or concerns, you'd like to report about the kits, please email naloxone.kit@recoveryalberta.ca with your feedback. This information may be valuable in ensuring the program meets the needs of all Albertans.

How should someone respond to opioid poisoning if they don't have naloxone?

If opioid poisoning is suspected, remain calm, look for signs of opioid poisoning (i.e., slow or no breathing, pale face, cold and/or damp skin, blue lips or nails), check to see if the person is breathing, and if you can wake them up. If they are not breathing or can't be woken up, call 911 immediately. Provide the 911 operator with all the information you can. Answer all their questions and follow their direction. Having First Aid and/or CPR training is always beneficial but not required. If you can provide rescue breaths or CPR (if needed), do so until

Emergency Medical Services arrive to take over. Do not give any other medication to the person, throw water on them or put them in the shower, hit/slap/punch them or force them to vomit. These interventions can further harm them and complicate the emergency response needed to help them.

Can I get arrested if there are drugs at the scene and I call 911 to help someone experiencing opioid poisoning?

The Good Samaritan Drug Overdose Act provides some legal protection for individuals seeking emergency help during a poisoning. The act became a law on May 4, 2017, and is an effort to address the opioid crisis by reducing the fear of arrest for those using drugs and to encourage people to help save a life. The Act may be able to protect a person from being charged with possession of a controlled substance [section 4(1), Controlled Drugs and Substances Act] as well as specific breaches of conditions around simple possession. More information can be found on the Government of Canada website linked above.

Can I use my naloxone kit at work?

Community-based naloxone kits are intended for use by members of the public. Workers who would like to have naloxone to use as part of their job duties may visit the Government of Alberta Workers administering injectable naloxone website to learn more. Naloxone for the workplace will need to be purchased as vials or as kits available at community pharmacies (usually coming in red cases instead of black for the community).

Where can I get support after responding to a suspected poisoning?

Like any emergency situation, responding to a suspected opioid poisoning can be quite stressful and sometimes traumatic. If you respond to a poisoning, it is important to take care of yourself following the event. This may include debriefing with those you trust, taking time for yourself and/or accessing resources and services available to you. Some of these services include, but are not limited to:

- First Nations and Inuit Hope for Wellness Help Line: 1-855-242-3310 (24/7)
- 211 Alberta: call 211 or ab.211.ca for support finding community resources (24/7).

Where can I find more information?

Visit drugsafe.ca to find out more about safer substance use. Contact 211 Alberta by calling 211 (24/7) for information on community addiction and mental health supports near you. For any outstanding questions, please email naloxone.kit@recoveryalberta.ca.

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