



Separating Facts from Fiction: The Opioid Epidemic

When you have a minor ache or pain, you may take over-the-counter medicine for relief. But for people with more severe pain, a doctor may recommend a stronger prescription medication. These stronger drugs can take the form of opioids. There are many types of legal opioids that can help manage strong or chronic pain, such as morphine or oxycodone. But misuse of these prescriptions can lead to a substance use disorder. Previously called opioid abuse or opioid dependency, opioid use disorder is a treatable psychiatric condition, according to the American Psychiatric Association.^[1]

The impact of opioids on the workplace

In a 2019 survey by the National Safety Council (NSC), more than 75 percent of employers reported that prescription drugs had affected their workplace. Some incidents reported in the survey include the following:

- Absenteeism or missed work
- Employee use of prescription pain relievers at work
- Positive drug test
- Impaired or decreased job performance
- Family member of employee affected
- Complaints to HR/Negative impact on employee morale
- Near miss or injury
- Borrowing or selling prescription drugs at work
- Arrest (on or off the job)
- Overdose

Even worse: According to the NSC survey, only 19 percent of employers feel extremely prepared to deal with prescription drug misuse.^[2]

The facts on opioid use disorder

Opioid use disorders and overdoses continue to be a major public health problem in the U.S. and have contributed significantly to overdose deaths among those who use or misuse illicit and prescription opioids.

- In 2018, more than 67,367 Americans died from opioid-related drug overdoses and Pennsylvania had the fourth highest drug overdose death rate.^[3]
- 82.5 percent of people with substance use disorders aren't getting the treatment they need.^[4]
- 46 percent (almost half) of all Americans have a family member or close friend with a substance use disorder.^[5]

What you can do

As an employer, recognize that substance use disorders may have a big impact on your workplace. You can be a crucial resource for your employees struggling with substance use disorders, but only if you decide to be proactive and acknowledge this issue.

Treat substance use disorder as an illness. Substance use disorders are brain-based illnesses; they are not diseases of failed willpower or character weakness. Creating a tolerant, understanding work environment may help increase the likelihood that employees will feel comfortable seeking assistance.

Educate your workforce on substance use disorders.

While opioids are top of mind now, people may struggle with all sorts of substance use disorders—whether it be tobacco, alcohol, or a more illicit substance. Educating your workforce around substance use disorders can help prevent them or give those struggling the resources they need to get help.

Leverage Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs). EAPs can help employees and their dependents with many types of issues and connect those in need to confidential treatment and support.

Resources for those struggling with opioid use disorder

When someone has an opioid use disorder, stopping use on their own can be difficult. But, like many other chronic conditions, opioid use disorder can be treated successfully with the right support. Different forms of treatment are available, ranging from medication-assisted treatment to group therapy and counseling. Many people with a substance use disorder may feel ashamed or embarrassed, but it's important to remember that these resources may help.

UPMC Health Plan, UPMC, and the University of Pittsburgh Schools of Health Sciences are actively collaborating to bring research, payer, and provider together to confront the crisis.

Prevention and proactive provider education coupled with UPMC Health Plan tools and resources.

As an IDFS, UPMC works to prevent opioid use disorder before it begins by combining provider interventions, education tools, and UPMC Health Plan's strategies such as: formulary management, pharmacy point-of-service alerts that target potential overuse, retrospective claims analysis, and clinical programs and quality measures.

Deploying medical research and best practices.

UPMC Health Plan works closely with UPMC to prioritize research and develop best practices for treatment of opioid use disorder. UPMC is a large provider of addiction-related medical services in Pennsylvania, including medication-assisted treatment. UPMC offers a comprehensive approach to care that begins with childhood prevention and extends through a lifetime of interventions and treatment—all backed by comprehensive research.

Fighting against the intergenerational impact of opioid addiction.

UPMC Health Plan recognizes the need to alleviate the intergenerational impact of opioid use disorder on individuals and families who are already dealing with the issue. UPMC Health Plan is working with hospitals like UPMC Magee-Womens Hospital, UPMC Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh, and UPMC Western Psychiatric Hospital to build programs that create physical and behavioral health interventions to help mothers, babies, and children.

Helping members access support.

UPMC Health Plan's LifeSolutions EAP is a confidential resource that can help employees enrolled with UPMC Health Plan and their dependents thrive. Using these services can help employees—including those with substance use disorders—assess their needs and get a referral for the appropriate mode of treatment.

These components, and more, help people to move from one level of support to another depending on their individual needs and rates of recovery.

To learn more about employer group coverage, visit www.upmchealthplan.com/employer or call **1-833-825-2696**.

Additional resources

For Pennsylvania residents:

- PA Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs Get Help Now website – Assists in finding a treatment provider or funding for addiction treatment
- Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's Guide to Treating Heroin and Opioid Addiction – Compilation of resources including the do's and don'ts of responding to an opioid overdose and drug take-back locations
- Call the Heroin & Opioid Addiction Hotline at 1-800-662-HELP

National resources:

- U.S. HHS, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) – Find behavioral health treatment services anonymously
- HHS Opioid Practical Toolkit – Aimed at faith-based and community organizations, but contains many great resources concerning awareness and education
- HHS Guidelines on Preventing Opioid Abuse and Addiction
- HHS Opioid Epidemic Overview – Background, statistics, and an outline of the federal government's five-point strategy to combat the opioid epidemic
- U.S.D.A. Overview – Opioid Misuse in Rural America
- U.S.D.A. Federal Resources for Rural Communities to Help Address Substance Use Disorder and Opioid Misuse

[1] (American Psychiatric Association 2013)

[2] (www.nsc.org/home-safety/safety-topics/other-poisons)

[3] (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2019)

[4] (SAMHSA Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality 2014)

[5] (Pew Research Center 2017)