

Drug overdose

WHAT IS AN OVERDOSE?

An overdose occurs when too much of a drug, medication or poison is taken, which may result in a toxic effect on the body. Many substances can cause harm when taken in excess including alcohol, illegal (and 'party') drugs, prescription and over-the-counter medication, and some herbal remedies. The harm may not be immediately obvious.

WHY DO PEOPLE OVERDOSE?

There are two main reasons people overdose.

Accidental

A person can accidentally overdose when they take the wrong substance (a drug or medication) or the wrong combination, in the wrong amount or at the wrong time, not knowing that it could cause them harm.

Taking multiple medications can cause confusion and can be difficult to manage. Check with your doctor or pharmacist about what you are taking and how to take the medication if you are unsure.

Intentional misuse

A person might overdose to get 'high' or to cause deliberate harm. Any deliberate harm may be a cry for help or a suicide attempt. Intentional misuse of drugs may indicate a serious mental health problem and help should be sought even if the overdose has not caused harm.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

A wide variety of symptoms is possible. Symptoms will depend on the substance, the amount taken and your health. Some poisons only cause minor distress or harm, while others can cause serious problems and possibly death.

Symptoms can include:

- nausea and vomiting
- burning in the throat or stomach (oesophagitis or gastritis) after drinking a corrosive substance
- dizziness
- high or low blood pressure
- fitting (seizures)
- drowsiness, confusion or coma (the person is unconscious)
- organ damage or failure (especially the liver or kidneys)
- breathing problems
- respiratory or cardiac arrest – when the person stops breathing or their heart stops beating/pumping blood around the body.

There may be no obvious symptoms, or only minor symptoms, even when severe damage is occurring in some overdoses (for example, in a paracetamol overdose). Always seek medical help in the event of a known or suspected overdose.

TESTS AND TREATMENT

The tests and treatment given depend on what has been taken and the clinical features. There are a number of possible tests and treatments. Some treatments need to be given soon after an overdose to prevent serious harm. It is important to seek medical advice for any overdose as soon as possible, even if there are no symptoms.

Tests and treatment include:

- blood tests and/or an ECG (heart rhythm trace)
- intravenous fluids (into the vein) or medication – usually to improve low blood pressure
- observation in hospital and monitoring of vital signs and heart rhythms (if necessary)

- removing the substance from the body (such as using activated charcoal, which binds to the drug so the body cannot absorb it – this must be given within an hour of substance ingestion; however, charcoal is rarely given and works only on certain types of poisons)
- an antidote to reverse the effect of the toxic substance (for some drugs)
- admission to hospital for further treatment

If you are discharged home, you may need to follow up with your local doctor for more blood tests within a couple of days to make sure there is no delayed damage to the liver, kidneys or other organs. Your doctor will advise you if this is necessary.

WHAT TO EXPECT

- Many overdoses do not cause serious harm or long-term damage, and most people make a full recovery.
- Some overdoses can cause damage to organs such as the liver and kidneys and may result in death.
- If the overdose was an attempt at self-harm or suicide, ongoing treatment and follow-up with a mental health professional may be arranged before the person is sent home.
- Follow-up or treatment referral to a drug and alcohol service may be arranged if the overdose was related to drugs of addiction such as methamphetamine.

PREVENTION

To avoid a drug overdose in future:

- Tell a doctor or healthcare professional of any previous medication problems.
- Take prescription medications as directed.
- Have a list of your medications outlining how and when to take them to avoid confusion.
- Keep all medications in their original packaging.
- Keep all medications and poisons locked away in a safe secure place out of reach of children.

- Ask your GP for available support systems in your area if you are experiencing mental health or alcohol and drug issues.
- If you take a number of medications each day, a pharmacy Webster pack may be helpful to avoid incorrect use and overdose
- Avoid illegal or 'party' drugs.

First aid

- If you think someone has taken an overdose call the Poison Information Centre (13 11 26), even if they seem okay. The centre is open 24 hours a day, every day, Australia-wide.

In an emergency:

- Dial triple zero (000) and ask for an ambulance. Ask for the police if the person is violent.
- Do not try to make the person vomit.
- Bring any medication containers to the hospital.

Seeking help

In a medical emergency call an ambulance – dial triple zero (000).

Following an overdose, check with your local doctor or healthcare professional to ensure there is no delayed damage. You may need blood tests.

For health advice from a registered nurse you can call NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day on 1300 60 60 24 for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria.*

NURSE-ON-CALL provides access to interpreting services for callers not confident with English.

* Calls from mobiles may be charged at a higher rate.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- Ask your local doctor or healthcare professional.
- Call the Poisons Information Centre on 13 11 26.
- In a crisis or for mental health support, phone Lifeline on 13 11 14.
- Visit the Better Health Channel at www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au
- Phone DirectLine – a free, confidential drug and alcohol counselling service – on 1800 888 236.
- Visit www.nps.org.au and search for 'medicinewise' to download an app to manage your medication list.

To receive this publication in an accessible format phone 9096 7770, using the National Relay Service 13 36 77 if required, or email emergencycare.clinicalnetwork@safercare.vic.gov.au

Disclaimer: This health information is for general education purposes only. Please consult with your doctor or other health professional to make sure this information is right for you.

Authorised and published by the Victorian Government, 1 Treasury Place, Melbourne.

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ISBN 978-1-76069-821-8
(pdf/online/MS word)



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