

## Lee's story

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It's hard to put into words why I love opioids so much. My life has been a hard one, and it just takes away all the bad stuff. I feel warm, I feel loved. I feel safe. I don't hurt so much. I feel creative and inspired when I'm using. There is a down side of course. I haven't always been as informed and careful as I am now – I contracted Hep C in my early 20s. I wish I'd known then what I know now. I spent years using heroin, and had to deal with a lot of my friends dying. I'd get hassled by the cops a lot. I'd spend all my money and then do what I needed to survive. These days I just can't afford the consequences of the lifestyle – I have kids and a job. So I'm on a methadone program and am finding things easier to manage – less drama. I think one day I'd like to stop completely.

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## Contacts

**If you want to talk to someone about your own or someone else's alcohol or other drug use, you can get more information from:**

ReGen  
1800 700 514 (Freecall)  
contact@regen.org.au  
www.regen.org.au

### **State-wide (Victoria):**

DirectLine (24/7 service offering counselling, information and referral)  
1800 888 236  
www.directline.org.au

Department of Health Website  
<https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/alcohol-and-drugs>

### **Support & information for drug users from other drug using peers:**

Harm Reduction Victoria  
(03) 9329 1500  
www.hrvic.org.au

### **Support for family members or friends affected by a loved one's use:**

Family Drug Help  
1300 660 068  
www.familydrughelp.org.au

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# Opioids

# Facts

# about

## Facts about Opioids

**Opioids slow the function of the central nervous system, which influences your breathing and your heart rate. They reduce pain and are used widely in medicine.**

Opioids are divided into two groups:

**Opiates** come from the opium poppy, and are sometimes referred to as 'natural opioids'. They have been used for thousands of years throughout most cultures. They include opium, morphine, heroin and codeine.

**Opioids** include both the natural opiate drugs and synthetic drugs that act in the same way. Synthetic opioids include oxycodone, fentanyl and methadone.

Some opioids come in a powder which is generally smoked or injected. Others are available in pill form, and some are made as patches. Each method of use and type of opioid has slightly different effects and will last in your system for different amounts of time.

### **Opioid Effects**

Immediate effects can include:

- Pain relief and relaxation
- Intense pleasure and euphoria
- Lowered heart rate and blood pressure
- Drowsiness, confusion and reduced coordination
- Nausea and vomiting

When you use opioids regularly, your body adapts and becomes used to their presence. People develop a tolerance, and need to take more to get the same effect. With regular use, dependence can develop. This means that you don't feel 'normal' without it. Dependence can be both physical and psychological.

## Opioid overdose

Opioids are depressants which slow your breathing and heart rate. If you take too much or mix them with other depressants such as benzos and alcohol, your breathing can stop altogether. It's important to be aware of any other drugs in your system, especially benzos such as Valium and Xanax because they stay active long after the effect you took them for has worn off.

It's important to be aware that your tolerance can drop quickly. If you haven't used for a couple of days (or more) due to detox, prison or just a break, your tolerance will have decreased. This means that you will need less gear to feel the same effect, and taking the same amount as before could result in an overdose. You don't need to stop using completely for your tolerance to be affected.

Signs that someone might be overdosing include:

- Shallow breathing and snoring or gurgling noises
- Unconsciousness (lapsing in and out of consciousness is also a danger sign and someone should be monitored closely in this situation), or no response.
- Lips or face turning blue

While some people overdose immediately, people can overdose up to an hour or so after their shot. If you are concerned about someone, call 000 immediately and use naloxone (see below).

**Remember that overdose is reversible!  
In many cases, people can be saved up to half an hour after they overdose.**

### **Naloxone**

Naloxone, also known as Narcan, is a substance that can be injected into the muscle to reverse the effect of overdose. It is safe and easy to use, and will have no effect on someone other than to reverse the effects of opioid use. Naloxone is available over the counter in some pharmacies, and more cheaply by prescription. Contact your nearest treatment or harm reduction service for more information.

## Reducing the Harms

While the easiest way to avoid harm from opioids is to not use them, if you choose to use, there are ways to avoid some of the potential harms:

### **Be aware of what other drugs you may have in your system**

- What else have you used today? And yesterday? Some drugs (especially benzos) stay active in your system long after the initial effect has worn off.

### **Know your source**

- Unless you are using pharmaceutical opioids, the quality and purity of what you are using is unknown. Listen out for reports of changes to purity and strength. If you are unsure how strong it is, try to use a smaller amount than you normally would. You can always top up later.

### **Make it easy for people to help if you overdose**

- Try not to use behind a locked door. If you are using in a public toilet, mix up with the door locked, and then unlock it before you have your shot. Avoid using alone whenever possible.

### **Method of use**

- Each method carries different risks, but it is safer to smoke heroin than to inject it. The effects will not be as strong, but there is less risk of becoming dependent, catching a blood-borne virus (HIV or hepatitis C) and overdosing. If you decide to inject heroin:
  - » NSPs can provide you with new, sterile injecting equipment and give you advice on how to use more safely.
  - » Look after your veins. Rotating your injecting sites will give them a chance to recover.
  - » Always use new, sterile equipment and don't share it with anyone else (even your spoon, water, filter and tourniquet). Dispose of your equipment safely.
  - » Always wash your hands in warm soapy water before and after injecting. If you don't have access to a tap, you can use a swab to wipe your hands clean.