

SAFETY & HEALTH | HAZARD ALERT

Opioid Hazard Alert

Millions of people take prescription opioids to treat severe or chronic pain or use opioids recreationally. You may know these opioids by the names hydrocodone, oxycodone, morphine, codeine, heroin, and fentanyl. Fentanyl is 50 to 100 times more potent than morphine, which greatly increases the likelihood of an unintentional overdose. Fatalities due to unintentional overdoses have increased in the last several years; more than 100,000 people died of an overdose in the U.S. in 2022.

Workplace overdoses are also on the rise. According to the US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, over 100 workplace deaths in California alone were due to unintentional overdose, accounting for 22% of all workplace fatalities occurring in California in 2022.

An overdose can happen to anyone who takes opioids, knowingly or unknowingly. This is because opioids slow down the breathing rate. A person experiencing an overdose will often appear not to be breathing at all. The signs of opioid overdose can include:

- Slow or shallow breathing
- Gurgling during breathing
- Blue-tinged lips or fingernails
- Pale or clammy skin
- Very small pupils
- Faint heartbeat
- Limp arms and legs
- Unconsciousness, or decreased level of consciousness

Preventing Workplace Fatalities

Opioid overdose medications, such as naloxone (also known as Narcan or Kloxxado), are available. They can immediately reverse the effects of an overdose, but only if they are administered in time. If a person has stopped breathing due to an opioid overdose, the naloxone must be administered within two to four minutes to save the person's life.

NALOXONE



Naloxone is not harmful if it is given to a person who is not experiencing an opioid overdose.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved two forms of naloxone: a nasal spray and an injection. The nasal spray is available over-the-counter and does not require a prescription.

Naloxone at Work

Employers can include naloxone in the workplace, but they should consider a few factors first:

- **Worker and client demographics and history.** Anyone could be using opioids, but some industries or occupations may have higher risk of opioid overdoses occurring onsite. These include any workplace where there is a high rate of injuries, or where workers do not have access to sufficient paid sick leave. Also, workers in occupations where opioids may be encountered, such as law enforcement, emergency response, health care, and environmental cleanup, can be at risk of occupational exposure to opioids.
- **Legality.** Speak to an attorney. Stadiums, concert venues, and amusement parks are required to have naloxone available on the premises, and their employees are specifically protected regarding the administration of naloxone. California's Good Samaritan Law generally protects citizens who voluntarily provide first aid in an emergency.
- **Consult a physician.** Employers should check with a physician to learn if naloxone may be recommended for their workplace.

Workplace naloxone program

If an employer decides to include naloxone in their workplace, they should establish and implement a workplace naloxone program, including policies and procedures on responding to an opioid overdose. The workplace safety officer, safety committee, human resources staff, and employees and their representatives should be involved. Such a program should include:

- Risk and readiness assessment, including identification of employees who volunteer to participate in the naloxone program.
- Recordkeeping to document incidents while maintaining privacy of those involved.
- Procedures to prepare for and respond to an incident onsite.
- Procedures for debriefing an overdose incident.
- Training for supervisors and employees on managing an overdose (see below).
- Obtaining a sufficient quantity of naloxone and storing it in a secure, yet unlocked, place that is readily accessible to employees.
- Personal protective equipment (PPE), including non-latex gloves and a breathing mask for rescue breathing and CPR, stored with the naloxone for easy access.

Training

Employers should designate and train supervisors and employees to recognize signs of an overdose and respond properly. Training topics should include:

- Signs and symptoms of an opioid overdose.
- What naloxone is, and what it does and does not do.
- Where the naloxone is stored and how to administer the form of naloxone available at the workplace.
- Procedures for responding to a possible opioid overdose, including managing the airway and breathing of a person experiencing an overdose.
- How to check for hazards before entering the area where the overdose has occurred.
- Calling 911. After receiving naloxone, the person

having an overdose will likely have withdrawal symptoms, or may experience a return of opioid overdose symptoms. They might have other medical issues that require further treatment by paramedics.

- Naloxone only works for about 30 to 90 minutes, so it may wear off before the effects of the opioid overdose does. A second dose of naloxone may be needed.
- Where required, train and certify workers in CPR and first aid.
- Necessary PPE and how to use it properly.
- Support resources available to employees for substance misuse.
- Bloodborne pathogens. At the scene of an opioid overdose, there may be used syringes, blood, or body fluids containing blood. In addition, if the injectable form of naloxone is used, employees will need to know how to dispose of the syringe or injector afterwards. If using the injectable form of naloxone, also provide a portable sharps disposal container. Refer to title 8 of the California Code of Regulations, section **5193** for requirements related to bloodborne pathogen exposure.
- While naloxone would not fall under the requirements of the **Hazard Communication Standard**, employers and employees should refer to the safety data sheet (available online or from the manufacturer if not included with the naloxone) for safety information.

Additional Resources

- Cal/OSHA
 - **5193**. Bloodborne Pathogens Standard
- **CDPH – Stop Opioid Overdose with Naloxone**
- **NIH – Naloxone Drug Facts**
- **NIOSH - Using Naloxone to Reverse Opioid Overdose in the Workplace: Information for Employers and Workers**
- **NSC: Can You Recognize the Signs of an Opioid Overdose?**
- **NSC Workplace Toolkit**

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This document is available with active links at www.dir.ca.gov/dosh/dosh_publications

For assistance regarding this subject matter, employers may contact

Cal/OSHA Consultation Services at 1-800-963-9424 or InfoCons@dir.ca.gov

www.dir.ca.gov/dosh/consultation.html

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