

A P A R E N T ' S
T O
G U I D E

Teens & Opioids

axis

“

[T]hose who become addicted [to opioids] really are in a circumstance where they can no more...get free of the addiction than you could get free of...needing to eat or drink.

—National Institute of Health
Director Dr. Francis Collins

Even as Opioid Use Decreases, Teens Face a Public Health Crisis

While it's not unusual for the entertainment industry to glorify drug use, it's also not uncommon for us to read about celebrities dying from drug overdoses. One of the most famous of these cases [was when actor Heath Ledger died](#) in 2008 from overdosing on prescription medication.

You might also recall actor [Philip Seymour Hoffman's passing](#) in 2014, [as well as Prince's](#) in the spring of 2016. More recently, [21-year-old rapper Lil Peep](#) died in Nov. 2017. What did all of these deaths have in common? Opioids were either the causes or were contributing factors.

The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\) reports](#) that between 1999 and 2015, the number of prescription opioid abuses that have led to death have more than quadrupled. Happily, [teen opioid use has lately been declining](#) in comparison to the use of marijuana (which is holding steady) and vaping (which is on the rise). What's troubling, however, is that even though opioid use among teenagers is falling, [teen deaths from opioid overdoses are increasing](#). In fact, opioid deaths have increased so alarmingly that in February 2018, U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions [announced a new task force](#) that will target makers and distributors of prescription painkillers "who have contributed to an epidemic of fatal overdoses by selling too much of the addictive drugs."

[This article on opioid addiction](#) from *The New Yorker* in Oct. 2017 says that the painkiller fentanyl (Sublimaze) is now the "most commonly detected opioid in postmortems." This fast-acting synthetic painkiller is extremely fat-soluble and **almost 40 times more powerful than heroin**.

In this guide, we want to make you aware of the dangers that opioids pose to your teens and give you some practical advice on what you can do to address those dangers.

— What are opioids?

Drs. Kuhn, Swartzwelder, and Wilson are the authors of [Buzzed: The Straight Facts About the Most Used and Abused Drugs from Alcohol to Ecstasy](#). They define "opiates" as "any drugs, natural or synthetic, that produce the characteristic opiate effects: the combination of a dreamy, euphoric state; lessened sensation of pain; slowed breathing; constipation; and pinpoint pupils." The term "opioid," which we will be using, is a slightly more generic word referring to substances that cause these effects.

You've probably heard of opium, a drug prepared from one species of the poppy. The painkiller morphine is derived from the poppy's seedpod and was developed in the early 1800s. Later in that same century, the drug company Bayer wanted to make morphine more soluble in fat (so that it could reach the brain more quickly). So they added a chemical compound to morphine and created heroin, which they sold as a "non-addictive" morphine substitute for some years.

More recently, scientists have developed various prescription opioids, such as oxycodone, hydrocodone, and meperidine. You might recognize some of these under their brand names of OxyContin, Vicodin, and Demerol, respectively. Fentanyl, which we mentioned above, fits within this group. The abuse of opioids has become so much of a concern across the country that [many states have declared](#) a public health crisis.

— How do opioids affect the body?

Opioids can be consumed in a variety of ways, including snorting, smoking, swallowing pills, or injecting needles. The way people consume opioids impacts the speed at which the drugs enter the bloodstream and make it to the brain, thus affecting how much of a “rush” users feel. Taking opioids in a manner that allows them to enter the brain quickly (such as intravenously) causes an acute high. The body absorbs powder faster than it absorbs pills, which is why [people will crush OxyContin into powder](#) and snort it.

Opioids act on receptors in the brain and impact systems responsible for regulating emotions and physical movement, as well as a person’s body temperature, digestive system, sensitivity to pain, and ability to breathe. The pleasurable feelings people experience as a result of taking opioids include sexual arousal, decreased pain, and sleepiness. Opioids are “downers,” so users feel calm and relaxed. Pupils contract and breathing decreases. Other side effects include vomiting and constipation.

The most dangerous quality of opioids is arguably the fact that they inhibit breathing. It’s therefore possible for someone to overdose and die during his or her first time consuming an opioid. Opioids are even more life-threatening if someone takes them along with another substance that affects breathing, such as alcohol or sedatives.

Opioid withdrawal symptoms include having a runny nose, watery eyes, and flu-like symptoms. The drugs can cause constipation, so diarrhea is the body’s response to an absence of opioids after it’s adapted to them. Other symptoms could be muscle spasms, sweating, shivering, and increased pain (since opioids are pain suppressors). And of course, there’s the craving for the drug with its accompanying malaise and depression.

Opioids actually rewire the brain. As noted in the opening quotation, NIH Director [Dr. Francis Collins says](#) that opioid addicts are basically incapable of overcoming their addictions on their own.

— Which opioids are teens using?

It’s not uncommon for teenagers to abuse prescription painkillers and to [mix them with other substances](#), like alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, or amphetamines.

Prescription (and over-the-counter) drugs are the third most widely abused substances [among teens in the U.S.](#) who are 14 and older, with alcohol and marijuana being the first and second. In addition to certain stimulants and depressants, painkillers are the most popular type of prescription drugs that teenagers abuse.

Probably because they are legal, it’s common for people to think that prescription drugs are safer than heroin. **But this belief is false.** As noted earlier, the prescription drug fentanyl is far more potent than heroin. And while some teens prefer prescription drugs, heroin remains an accessible, highly addictive, and [inexpensive drug of choice](#).

Sometimes people even start off with prescription painkillers before turning to heroin because it’s cheaper. However, there is no conclusive evidence showing that painkiller addiction leads to heroin use or vice versa.

— What's the appeal?

There are [a variety of reasons](#) teens start using opioids and other drugs, including:

- dependence on an opioid prescription;
- pressure from peers or other people in their lives;
- teenage rebellion;
- academic stress;
- partying;
- boredom;
- self-medication; or
- curiosity (which can stem from friends who use them, media that portrays alcohol and drugs in a positive light, or people they follow on social media talking about them positively).

It's also worth mentioning the prolific portrayal of drug use, both as a positive and a negative experience, in pop culture. Recent songs by rapper Post Malone, such as "[Rockstar](#)" and "[I Fall Apart](#)," portray drug use as something that both demonstrates status and numbs pain (*warning: strong language*). Gucci Mane and Lil Pump each rap about the painkiller Percocet in the songs "[I Get the Bag](#)" and "[Gucci Gang](#)," respectively. The semi-recent song "[I Took a Pill in Ibiza](#)" by Mike Posner actually gives a more realistic portrayal of the effects of drugs, as well as sheds some light on why so many people try drugs in the first place.

If you're wondering why we're mentioning songs with offensive lyrics, many of these are hits listed on [Billboard's Hot 100](#) at the time of this writing. Pop star Demi Lovato (who is also on the Hot 100 at the moment) is another celebrity who used for several years [before becoming sober](#).

Even though it's now several years old, the TV show Breaking Bad is arguably one of the most popular (and well-made) TV shows in existence that has drugs as an integral part of its storyline. [This article lists](#) some of the most popular TV shows and movies on Netflix featuring drug use. Because pop culture has a huge influence on teens, we need to be aware of what it's saying about drug use so that we can talk to our kids about those ideas.

— Where do teens find opioids?

Friends and Family

It's not unusual for people, many of whom have good intentions, to share prescription medication with one another. Sharing medication with someone you know might seem innocent, but is actually quite dangerous. The majority of teenagers who abuse prescription opioids [obtain them from friends or family members](#).

There are other reasons, apart from the risk of addiction, why [sharing prescribed medication is a dangerous practice](#). One is that you don't know how one person's pain meds might affect someone else. You might not have any side effects to a medication your doctor prescribed, but your friend might have some that are severe and unexpected. And if you use a painkiller without seeing a doctor about your problem, whatever medical problem you have could worsen.

The Dark Web

You might have heard of the website Silk Road, an online black market that was commonly used for selling illegal drugs. The [FBI took down the Silk Road in 2013](#), but the "darknet" is still an

active place.

It's quite possible for people to do many illegal activities online if they want to, [including buying drugs](#). They do so by using a virtual private network (VPN), the TOR browser, and cryptocurrency, all of which help to preserve anonymity.

[This article in *The New York Times*](#) describes how two 13-year-olds overdosed on a synthetic opioid they bought from another teenager. Their dealer had purchased the drug on the darknet using bitcoins.

Social Media

A lot of teenagers might find it easier simply to peruse social media to find a dealer. [This article in *Marie Claire*](#) describes how teens are using emojis, as well as apps and platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, Reddit, and Yubo (formerly Yellow), to purchase drugs online.

Selling drugs is against the policies of social media platforms like Instagram. But these platforms rely on users to report inappropriate content, and users can't catch every shady person.

[DrugAbuse.com did an interesting experiment](#) to find out how difficult it would be to buy drugs from someone on Instagram. (Spoiler: It turned out to be pretty easy.)

The “Good” Old-Fashioned Street

We should note that despite the prevalence of the internet, when we talked to a narcotics officer in Colorado Springs, he said that (at least in this area) it's unusual to hear of teens purchasing drugs online. They mainly still buy them on the street. Most kids who are into heroin, said the officer, are out till 10 or 11 at night, and their parents simply don't know where they are.

It's really not that difficult for a teen (or even younger) to find someone who does drugs (and who can point them to a dealer), whether at school or elsewhere in peer groups. It's worth noting, as [this site points out](#), that drug use is different in different locations.

Here's an article on how easy it was for one Seattle teen [to find heroin where she lives](#). She believes that the overwhelming reason why teenagers do drugs is pressure from their friends.

— How do they hide them?

Hiding drugs is fairly easy because they are so small in size. This Chicago Tribune article lists the most [common places where teens hide drugs](#), such as:

- battery compartments;
- heating vents;
- cars;
- candy wrappers;
- shoes;
- stuffed animals; and
- highlighters.

This local news story highlighted all [the places where teenagers might be hiding drugs](#) in their bedrooms.

— Does my teen have a drug problem?

The National Institute on Drug Abuse has comprehensive information on [what teens should do if they are struggling with a drug addiction](#). Here are signs you should look for in order to tell if your child has a drug problem:

- Not spending time with friends and family;
- Changes in behavior, such as increased anger, depression, or defensiveness;
- Apathy toward former hobbies or interests;
- New eating and sleeping patterns;
- Problems at school, such as poor grades or missing class; and
- Trouble with law enforcement.

[Signs of addiction to painkillers](#) can also include:

- Blackouts and poor memory;
- Increased sensitivity (emotional or physical) to normal experiences; and
- Coughing, runny nose, and red and watery eyes.

— What do I do if my teen has used or is addicted to drugs?

If you discover that your children have abused opioids or have developed an addiction to them, **it's vital that you react in a way that communicates grace, truth, and love**. Don't lose your temper, and don't despair. It's easy to focus on the fact that your kids have deceived you, made some horrible decisions, and are now addicted. But there are always reasons why people make the choices they do. Maybe it was curiosity that caused them to try drugs, but it could very well be they are using because of some pain they have been hiding from you or because of a void they are trying to fill. Part of their journey toward wholeness might be uncovering deep rooted issues that have potentially led them toward drug addiction. In many cases, drug use is a manifestation of a larger problem.

Make sure your kids know you still love them, and remind them that God does, too. But set clear boundaries and take steps to get them help (see the resources linked within this guide, as well as the ones listed below). Look into rehab if at all possible. With a situation such as this one, going to a licensed therapist is likely a better option than merely trying on your own to get your kids to open up to you. It might be tempting to want to deal with the problem yourself, instead of seeking outside help. But if seeing a professional is what is truly necessary, it's important to do what is best for your son or daughter.

Be aware that if your teen has an opioid addiction, it's important that you keep an eye on your valuables. Do not allow your kids to be home alone. Teens who are addicted will steal from you, as well as manipulate their grandparents, in order to find the money to feed their habit.

Something else that is crucial to remember is that community and prayer are both powerful resources at your disposal. [1 Corinthians 12](#) tells us that all Christians are members of Christ's body. We suffer together, and we rejoice together. [Galatians 6](#) tells us to bear one another's burdens. **Invite people you trust into the suffering of your family, and allow them to support you through prayer ([Eph. 6:18](#)) or by any other means possible.**

— How do I prevent my teen from using opioids?

Don't Assume Anything

We pray your child isn't addicted to opioids, but don't be fooled into thinking that your teen is not "the type of person" who fits the profile of becoming a drug addict because there is no such profile. *Drug addiction could happen to anyone, and it's easy to hide.* We're not trying to make you fearful or paranoid. But you should be aware of the dangers, particularly because most people who do become addicted start using at a young age.

Be Alert About Media

Be aware that media affects how we think about life and can impact what we do. Watching violent movies and listening to angry music doesn't necessarily mean people will commit acts of violence. But it can make them angrier people than they would have been otherwise. In the same way, [the DEA reports](#) that teens who consume a lot of media depicting drug use are more likely to experiment with drugs.

Be Careful about Your Own Drug Use

Helping your children avoid a drug addiction starts with you being careful with drugs yourself. This cautiousness includes not lending prescription meds to someone else, even if you think doing so would be safe.

If you do have prescription painkillers in the house, make sure you keep an eye on them. Count them, remember how many pills you have so you will know if any go missing. Lock them up if necessary. It's also wise for you to have a thorough understanding of what painkillers (or other drugs) your doctor is prescribing you and your children and why. Your goal should be to get off of prescription opioids as soon as possible. Just because they're legal and the best option for managing pain does not mean they're safe.

Have Rules and Monitor Your Teens' Behavior

You can take the following preventative measures with your teenagers:

- Keep an eye on your credit card statements;
- Check browsers and social media apps, looking not only for suspicious sites but also to see if your kids have recently cleared their history;
- Get to know your kids' friends and their families;
- Be aware of your children's general habits so that you're also aware of any odd changes;
- Know where they're spending their time.

You should also have [clear guidelines and house rules](#) for drug and alcohol use. One of your main rules will obviously be that they're not allowed to use anything illegal. But your house rules could also establish guidelines about not spending time with or getting rides from people who might be high or under the influence.

Cultivate Healthy Connection and Community

[This powerful video](#), based on Johann Hari's New York Times best-selling book [Chasing The Scream: The First and Last Days of the War on Drugs](#), helps us to rethink how to attack addiction. If you do only one thing suggested in this guide, watch this video. (Also, check out the related website [ChasingTheScream.com](#).)

Conversation Is Huge

One of the most important steps you can take for your kids to help them not to try drugs is to have an open and ongoing dialogue with them. Educate them on the drugs that are out there and their dangers.

Make sure your children know what [tactics dealers will use](#) to try to get them to buy. They should also know that dealers could easily sell them a corrupt product, the wrong product, or a product with a more powerful effect than they will expect (potentially leading to overdose and death).

Discussion Questions

- How knowledgeable are you about the kinds of drugs out there? How aware are you of the drug situation in our city?
- Do you know anyone who is using drugs, opioids in particular? If so, where are they getting them from? How are the drugs affecting their lives?
- How should you react if someone tries to sell you drugs? Has anyone ever tried to before?
- Have you ever seen anyone selling drugs online?
- Do you have any friends whose parents are abusing drugs? What do you think is motivating them?
- Do you think our culture glorifies drug use? Why or why not?
- Do you think that watching TV shows or movies showing drug use could or would make you curious about drugs? Why or why not?
- Why are people drawn to drugs in general and opioids in particular (apart from the chemical dependency they create)? What is lacking in people's lives that would make them turn to drugs?
- What is a biblical view of drug use? Why does God not want us to use drugs?
- When people rely on drugs to be happy or to survive in their lives, what is missing in their understanding of God's view of pleasure?
- Do you think God wants us to experience happiness, pleasure, and joy? Explain.

As you discuss the questions above, don't merely focus on the negatives of how opioids can harm your teens. It's important for them to understand that God's vision for pleasure is far better than the temporary thrills drugs offer. Opioids are a powerful depiction of how sin entices, enslaves, and destroys us ([James 1:14-15](#)).

One of the resources linked above (from the NCADD) recommends promoting healthy family activities. This advice is on track. All of us need to know more than what **not** to do in life. We need to know what we **can** do that is good. How can you cast a vision for "the good life" and help your teen live it out? God created a beautiful world, and it's right to relish His generosity and be thankful for all of His gifts. But He didn't create us merely to live for our own enjoyment (although there's certainly nothing wrong with enjoying our lives!). He created us to love and serve others. Helping people overcome pain or evil in their lives can be deeply meaningful experiences.

What are you doing as a family to serve Him and to serve others? In a world of pain, depression, and anxiety, how is your family cultivating truth, beauty, and goodness? Consider going on a mission trip as a family or serving at a food shelter in your city. Save your money and surprise the people behind you in the fast food line by paying for their meals. It's true that it's possible to do these activities in a self-centered way. But if we have the right motives, God often blesses us with joy as we generously bless others. The experience of genuinely helping someone else is far greater than the temporary pleasure and long-term slavery that are the only "gifts" drugs can offer.

— The bottom line

The opioid crisis presents a very real danger for all of us. Even if we aren't directly affected (yet), there are people all around us who are struggling with addiction. These people need us and our teens to help, to show them Christ's love and compassion, and to help them find healing, both physically and spiritually.

Though there's no sure-fire, guaranteed way to prevent opioid use and abuse in our kids, we can begin the conversation now, exposing not just the ugly truth about drugs, but also the lies in how our culture tends to glamorize drug use. Above all, we need to cast a better vision for pleasure, enjoyment, and purpose in this world. When compared with the abundant life of Christ, being high pales in comparison! How are we cultivating that perspective in our children?

Our kids need us for oh so many reasons, but opioids remind us that they need us to protect them—not by sheltering them or shaming them into submission, but by inviting them into a larger narrative and by being their safe haven. Whether you find yourself in the midst of dealing with an opioid addiction or are simply concerned about the risks, never stop reminding your kids that they can tell you anything and that you and God love them *no matter what*.

— Additional resources

General info

- [“Heroin: Research Report Series,”](#) National Institute on Drug Abuse
- [“Misuse of Prescription Drugs: Research Report Series,”](#) National Institute on Drug Abuse
- [“What are opioids and why are they dangerous?”](#) Mayo Clinic
- [“Opioid Addiction,”](#) familydoctor.org
- [“How Science Is Unlocking the Secrets of Addiction,”](#) National Geographic
- [“After Declining for Several Years, Teen Drug Overdose Deaths Inched Up in 2015,”](#) The Washington Post
- [“The American Opioid Crisis,”](#) The New Yorker
- [“The Family That Built an Empire of Pain,”](#) The New Yorker
- [“El Chapo and the Secret History of the Heroin Crisis,”](#) Esquire
- [“Founder and Owner of Pharmaceutical Company Insys Arrested and Charged with Racketeering,”](#) U.S. Attorney's Office, District of Massachusetts
- [“Supply, Not Despair, Caused the Opioid Epidemic,”](#) Bloomberg
- [“Looking at root causes of opioid addiction in the U.S.,”](#) St. Louis Public Radio
- [“Why it's so much easier to get an opioid prescription in the US than in Europe or Japan,”](#) Vox
- [“Prescribed Painkillers Didn't Cause the Opioid Crisis,”](#) Tonic
- [“Opioid Overdose,”](#) the CDC
- [“Teen drug overdose death rate climbed 19% in one year,”](#) CNN
- [“Drug dealers using Instagram and Tinder to find young customers,”](#) The Guardian
- [“How Do Young People Acquire These Drugs?”](#) Narconon
- [“Secret Stash: Where Do Teens Hide Their Drugs?”](#) Rehabs.com
- [“I told my doctors my drug history. Yet they gave me opioids without counseling,”](#) STAT

Addiction treatment

- “[Seeking Drug Abuse Treatment: Know What to Ask](#),” National Institute on Drug Abuse
- “[Medications to Treat Opioid Addiction](#),” National Institute on Drug Abuse
- “[Get Help](#),” Just Think Twice
- “[Treatment Approaches for Drug Addiction](#),” National Institute on Drug Abuse
- [Addiction Is Real](#)
- “[Opioids: Addiction, Withdrawal, and Recovery](#),” Addictions and Recovery
- “[5 Tips for Family and Friends of an Opiate Addict](#),” Discovery Place
- “[Opiate Withdrawal Timelines, Symptoms, and Treatment](#),” American Addiction Centers
- “[Life after Opioid Addiction: Three Survivors Tell How They Got Clean](#),” The Guardian
- “[How to Help an Opiate Addict](#),” DrugAbuse.com
- “[10 ways to get off opiates](#),” The Recovery Village

We’re creating more content every day! If you found this guide helpful and valuable, check out axis.org/guides each month for new Guides covering all-new topics and for other resources.