

PARENT CONVERSATION GUIDE



# HOW TO TALK WITH YOUR CHILD ABOUT OPIOIDS AND FENTANYL

CONVERSATIONS SAVE LIVES!



A PARENT GUIDE TO HELPING  
YOU START THE HARD BUT  
NEEDED CONVERSATIONS.





# BEFORE YOU TALK

## KNOW THE FACTS

As this guide will show, opioid misuse can affect the health and well-being of children and teens at a critical point in their lives — when they are growing, learning, maturing, and laying the foundation for their adult years.

As a parent, your children look to you for help and guidance in working out problems and in making decisions, including the decision not to use drugs. Even if you have used drugs in the past, you can have an open conversation about the dangers. Whether or not you tell your child about your past drug use is a personal decision. But experience can better equip us to teach others by drawing on the value of past mistakes. Let's arm you with the facts to help facilitate a productive conversation.

## FACTS:

### WHAT ARE OPIOIDS?



There are legal opioids like prescription pain relievers and illegal opioids like heroin and illicit fentanyl. Prescription opioids are powerful pain-reducing medications. Some prescription opioids are made directly from the opium poppy plant. Others are made by scientists in a laboratory although they have similar chemical structures.

What are the most commonly used prescription opioids?

Common opioid medicines include:

- hydrocodone (Vicodin<sup>®</sup>) • oxycodone (OxyContin,<sup>®</sup> Percocet<sup>®</sup>)
- oxymorphone • morphine (Kadian,<sup>®</sup> Avinza<sup>®</sup>) • codeine
- fentanyl





# BEFORE YOU TALK

## KNOW THE FACTS

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#### HOW DO OPIOIDS AFFECT THE BRAIN AND MAKE PEOPLE FEEL HIGH?

Opioids attach to and activate opioid receptors located in many areas of the brain, spinal cord, and other organs in the body, especially those involved in feelings of pain and pleasure.

When opioids attach to these receptors, they block pain signals sent from the brain to the body and release large amounts of dopamine in the brain's reward regions. Dopamine is the chemical responsible for motivating our actions and repeating pleasurable experiences. This release can strongly reinforce the act of taking the drug, making the user want to take the drug again and again despite negative consequences.




#### HOW DO PEOPLE USE OPIOIDS?

Prescription opioids are prescribed by doctors to treat pain and other health issues, such as controlling coughs and diarrhea. When used as prescribed and for a short time, opioids are relatively safe. But when they are misused, they can be dangerous.

People misuse opioids by:

- taking a prescription in ways other than instructed, like taking more than prescribed or taking it more often.
- getting and using prescription pills from a friend or family member, even if it's for a real medical condition.
- taking prescription drugs to get high.
- mixing prescription opioids with alcohol or other drugs.
- crushing pills or opening capsules, dissolving the powder in water, and injecting the liquid into a vein, or snorting the powder.

Some opioids, like heroin, aren't available by prescription. People use these drugs just to get high.





# FACTS:

# BEFORE YOU TALK KNOW THE FACTS

## WHAT ARE THE HEALTH EFFECTS OF OPIOIDS?

In the short-term, opioids can relieve pain and make people feel relaxed. However, opioids can also have harmful effects, including:

- extreme drowsiness
- confusion
- nausea
- constipation
- slowed breathing and even overdose and death.


Over time, opioid use and misuse can lead to insomnia, muscle pain, heart problems, pneumonia, addiction, and overdose/death.



## WHY DO YOUNG PEOPLE USE OPIOIDS?

Curiosity, peer pressure, and the desire to fit in with friends are common reasons that preteens and teens start misusing opioids. For some, opioid use begins as a way of coping with anxiety, anger, depression, or boredom. Preteens, and teens in particular, may struggle with depression and anxiety but do not recognize it or want to talk about it. Parents often assume there is nothing wrong if their children do not discuss their feelings. Being high can be a way of simply avoiding the problems and challenges of growing up.

Parents, grandparents, and older siblings are models who children follow, and research suggests that family members' use of alcohol and drugs plays a strong role in whether a young person starts using drugs, such as opioids. Addiction means a person continues to seek and take the drug despite negative consequences. All aspects of the teen environment—home, school, and community—can influence if they will try, or even become addicted to drugs.



# HOW CAN I PREVENT MY CHILD FROM USING OPIOIDS

There is no quick or simple solution to prevent teens from misusing opioids. However, it can be done. Research shows that parents have a big influence on their teens. **So, talk openly about the effects of opioids and other drugs with your children and stay actively engaged in their lives.**

To help you get started, the next section provides some key points about opioids that you can share with your kids to help them make the best decisions to avoid opioid misuse.

## KEY POINTS:

### **CAN MY TEEN TAKE SOMEONE ELSE'S PRESCRIPTION OPIOIDS IF HE OR SHE IS INJURED?**

No. It is dangerous to give your child someone else's medication, even if he or she is in real pain. You should never give your children opioids that were not prescribed for them. Doctors prescribe opioids specifically based on a person's physical and medical history, such as weight, other medical conditions, or how opioids interact with other medicines your child might be taking. Without talking to a doctor, you won't know how the opioids will affect your child or what dose should be safely given. If your child is prescribed opioids, make sure you monitor their use carefully.



# KEY POINTS:

## I'VE HEARD OF SOMETHING CALLED FENTANYL. WHAT IS THAT?

Fentanyl is another type of opioid that is similar to morphine. It is 50 times stronger than heroin. As a prescription, it's used to treat severe pain and is also used in surgeries. But fentanyl is also made and used illegally. It is sometimes added to heroin or to other drugs, like cocaine and methamphetamine, causing potent and unpredictable drug combinations that can lead to fatal overdose. It's also an opportunity to provide factual information to teens. Teens need to know that fentanyl-laced drugs are widespread, and that the first dose can be deadly.

## HOW CAN I TELL IF MY CHILD HAS BEEN MISUSING OPIOIDS?

Changes in your child's behavior—such as not brushing their hair or teeth, skipping showers, changes in mood, and challenging relationships with friends and family—can be signs that your child is misusing opioids or other drugs. It's also important to look out for changes in grades, skipping classes or missing school, loss of interest in activities or friends that used to bring enjoyment, changes in sleeping and eating habits, and getting in trouble at school or with law enforcement. These changes could all be related to drug use—or may indicate other problems.

## TALKING WITH TEENS: EXPLAIN THE REALITY

An effective conversation with youth about fentanyl will focus on listening and facts, not judgment. We know that youth want the adults in their lives to trust them with information and support them in making decisions. Simply telling kids “don't do drugs” may cause those most at risk to just tune out.

Listen first: Ask your teen non-judgmental questions. Is fentanyl something that you've heard about on the news, or at school? What have you heard? Do you think the risks are exaggerated? Where do you think teens your age are likely to start using pills and why? Even if teens seem to tune you out, continue to provide non-judgmental support and frequent conversations. Research tells us that parents and supportive influential adults can and do make a difference in whether a youth will engage in at-risk behaviors.

It's also an opportunity to provide factual information to teens. Teens need to know that fentanyl-laced drugs are widespread, and that the first dose can be deadly. Fentanyl-laced pills look identical to pills prescribed by doctors.





# TIPS FOR PARENTS

## BE A GOOD LISTENER.

- Set clear expectations about drug and alcohol use, including real consequences for not following family rules.
- Help your child deal with peer pressure to use drugs.
- Get to know your child's friends and their parents.
- If concerned, have your child evaluated for mental health issues such as depression or anxiety.
- Monitor your child's whereabouts.
- Carefully monitor your child's medications.
- **Do not leave unused opioids in accessible places in your home.**
- Supervise teen activities.
- **Talk to your child often.**
- Do not ignore signs that your child is changing in negative ways.

## Be clear about the risk

**An amount of fentanyl the size of two grains of salt is enough to cause a fatal overdose. It's tasteless, odorless, and impossible to see: There's no way to know by looking at a pill or powder whether it contains a potentially lethal amount of fentanyl.**

It's helpful for teens to know that the person selling or sharing the drugs may not even know the pills contain fentanyl. The danger is not limited to drugs bought from a stranger on the street or online. Adults should dispel the myth that drugs from "trusted sources," including friends or known dealers, are safe. They are not. **Pills and powders from any source (besides a medical provider or pharmacy) should be assumed to contain this deadly ingredient, making every dose a risk.**

**Because opioids are available by prescription, many children and teens don't understand their danger. Many also do not realize that dangerous fentanyl is added to many street drugs. Misusing opioids can be harmful and can alter the course of young peoples' lives, preventing them from reaching their full potential. That's reason enough to have this difficult conversation with your children. Be certain that the discussion focuses on how much you care about your child's health.**

