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PATIENT EDUCATION

# Naloxone

Narcan and other formulations / Opioid-overdose rescue

A guide for adults and the people who may need to help them during an opioid overdose.

GIVE NALOXONE AND CALL 911

REPEAT EVERY 2–3 MINUTES IF NEEDED

**Formulations:** Ready-to-use nasal sprays and injectable formulations are available. The steps here describe a single-use 4 mg nasal spray such as Narcan. Keep the instructions for your actual device with the medicine; injection kits need separate training.

## What it is used for

Naloxone is an emergency medicine for a known or suspected opioid overdose. Give it when someone cannot be awakened or is not breathing normally and an opioid may be involved. Call 911 and stay with the person. Do not wait to identify the exact drug.

## How it works

Naloxone blocks opioid receptors and can reverse opioid-related slowing of breathing. Its effect may wear off before the opioid does, so dangerous sleepiness and breathing problems can return after the person initially improves.

## What to expect over time

Look for improved breathing and responsiveness within minutes. If breathing remains abnormal, follow the 911 dispatcher's instructions for rescue breathing or CPR. Do not wait for naloxone to work before giving needed breathing support.

If the person is breathing normally, place them on their side to reduce choking risk. Stay until emergency responders arrive. Give another dose if severe sleepiness or breathing problems return.

## Using a 4 mg nasal spray

- Try to wake the person by calling loudly and gently shaking them. If an opioid overdose is suspected, give naloxone promptly.
- Lay the person on their back. Insert the nozzle into one nostril and press the plunger fully. Each device contains one dose; do not test or prime it.
- Call 911 immediately. If someone else is present, have them call while you give the first dose.
- If there is no response after two to three minutes, give another dose with a new device in the other nostril. Repeat every two to three minutes as needed while waiting for help.

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# Side effects and safety

## Possible side effects

- Sudden opioid withdrawal: sweating, shaking, nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea
- Agitation, irritability, or body aches
- Fast heartbeat or blood-pressure changes

## After giving naloxone

Emergency assessment is needed even after the person wakes up. Long-acting opioids and potent opioids can require repeated doses and continued monitoring.

Tell responders what you know about substances taken, the number of doses given, and the timing. Stay calm, give the person space, and avoid an argument if they wake confused or upset.

## Keep emergency help coming

Naloxone does not replace emergency medical care. Continue breathing support as directed and tell responders if symptoms return.

## Prepare before an emergency

Show household members and other likely responders where naloxone is kept and how to use it. A person who is unconscious cannot give their own rescue dose.

Do not delay emergency use because of pregnancy or concern about withdrawal. Restoring breathing takes priority.

## Medicines and interactions

Review all your medications with your provider, including over-the-counter medicines and supplements. Have new medications checked before taking them.

Naloxone reverses opioid effects, including pain relief. In someone physically dependent on opioids, it can trigger abrupt withdrawal.

It does not reverse every cause of unconsciousness or an overdose from alcohol or benzodiazepines alone. Give it if an opioid may be involved, and continue emergency care for other possible causes.

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# Living with your treatment

## When to get help

**Emergency symptoms.** Call 911 for suspected overdose, inability to wake, slow or absent breathing, or blue or gray lips. Give naloxone promptly and follow emergency breathing instructions.

**Prompt medical advice.** After emergency care, arrange replacement naloxone and a follow-up visit to review overdose risk, medication combinations, and treatment options.

If you feel unsafe or have thoughts of self-harm, call 911 or go to an emergency department.

## Your questions answered

**What if I am not sure opioids were involved?**
Give naloxone when an opioid overdose is possible. It has little effect when no opioid is present. Unresponsiveness still requires emergency care.

**Can the same spray device be reused?**
No. Each device delivers only one dose. Use a new device each time.

**Does waking up mean the emergency is over?**
No. Breathing problems can return. Do not leave the person alone or let them take more opioids to relieve withdrawal.

## Everyday tips

Carry more than one dose and check expiration dates. Replace used or damaged devices promptly.

Learn rescue breathing and CPR before an emergency. Keep instructions easy to find.

## Storage and safety

Keep nasal spray in its protective packaging, accessible to responders and out of children's reach. Follow its temperature instructions; protect it from freezing, excessive heat, and light. Do not leave it in a hot car.

### Sources

DailyMed: Narcan 4 mg Drug Facts and directions (August 2026)
FDA-approved Narcan prescribing information and Instructions for Use
SAMHSA: Opioid Overdose Reversal Medications (accessed 2026)

Educational handout; does not replace your prescription or provider's recommendations.