



What You Need to Know About the Opioid Epidemic

Introduction to the Opioid Epidemic

The nation's opioid overdose epidemic is the **single greatest public health crisis** of our time. In the past five years, we have lost more than 1,200 Rhode Islanders to overdose. [Governor Raimondo established the Overdose Prevention and Intervention Task Force](#) in 2015 to reduce the number of overdose deaths.

Understand the Stigma of Addiction

Addiction is *not* a moral failing or a character flaw, it is a chronic disease such as type 2 diabetes, asthma, or heart disease.

- Individuals do not start out intending to develop an addiction, however, eventually get caught up in it.
- Science has proven that opioid use disorder is a chronic disease that can be effectively managed with Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT).

Know the Risks of Opioid Prescription Pain Medications

Prescription opioids known as Vicodin[®], Percocet[®] and OxyContin[®] are powerful, highly addictive drugs that have the potential to cause long term dependence, overdose, and/or death. Know the risks of these pain medications, and consider talking with a healthcare provider about non-opioid options for pain management.

- Share RIDOHs educational tool, [Knowing the Risks of Opioid Prescription Pain Medications](#), with your Human Resources and/or Benefits department for inclusion in your organization's employee newsletter or employee benefits guide.

Dispose of Medicines Safely

Proper storage and disposal of opioid prescription pain medications can reduce the incidence of misuse and abuse.

- Keep out of reach of children – *one dose can cause an accidental overdose death.*
- Store in a secure location such as in a locked cabinet or lockbox.
- Unused opioid medications can be brought to a [local drug disposal site](#).

- If a drug disposal location is unavailable near you, the [Food and Drug Administration \(FDA\)](#) recommends flushing opioid prescription pain medications down the toilet.

Find Treatment and Recovery Resources

There are three convenient ways to connect individuals with Rhode Island-based treatment and recovery resources:

- Call **401-942-STOP (7867)**, Rhode Island's 24/7 treatment and recovery support hotline with English and Spanish-speaking counselors licensed in chemical dependency.
- Contact a [Rhode Island Centers of Excellence](#) to access treatment options for individuals with opioid use disorder.
- Visit [PreventOverdoseRI.org](#)

The Dangers of Fentanyl

Fentanyl is a dangerous synthetic opioid pain reliever normally approved for treating severe pain, prescribed in the form of transdermal patches that are placed on the skin or lozenges that are placed on the tongue. However, fentanyl can be diverted illegally for misuse and abuse, and can be deadly.

- Fentanyl is extremely dangerous because it is 100 times more potent than morphine and 50 times more potent than heroin.
- In the US, illegally-made fentanyl accounts for most cases of overdose and overdose death.
- In 2016, more than [50% of overdose deaths in Rhode Island involved illegal forms of fentanyl](#); most of these overdose deaths occurred among adults ages 25-54.
- Illegally-made fentanyl is often imported into the United States from China and is sold on the illegal drug market for its heroin-like effect.
- Fentanyl is often mixed with heroin and/or cocaine – with or without the user's knowledge- to increase the euphoric effects, but it ends up increasing the risk of death.
- One kilogram of illicit fentanyl has a street value of more than 10 million dollars.
- Counterfeit oxycodone pills sold illegally can also contain fentanyl.
- Fentanyl in its raw form is so dangerous that accidental exposure -including touching or breathing a tiny amount of it- can lead to an overdose.

Please contact RIDOHs Education and Outreach Coordinator, Monica B. Tavares (Monica.Tavares@health.ri.gov), to include this information in your organization's employee newsletter, or to schedule an appointment to learn more.