

## The Opioid Crisis in the United States

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From 1964–1975 47,000 Americans died in battle during the Vietnam War. In 1995, which was the peak year for the AIDS epidemic, 50,000 deaths were attributed to HIV. In 2016 alone 42,000 Americans died from an opioid drug overdose. That total averages about 112 people a day. Furthermore, it was estimated that those deaths affected a total of 63,000 families.

In 2017 72,000 Americans died from an opioid overdose for an average of about 200 Americans each day.

Since the 1990's opioid medications such as Vicodin, Percocet, Oxycontin, and Oxycodone have been improperly marketed by drug companies as the most effective treatment for pain relief. These so-called treatments, however, have acted as a gateway straight to heroin use and addiction then to overdose and death. Also, since the 1990's we have seen a rise in the use of cheap synthetic opioids such as fentanyl which, when mixed with heroin, can become 50 to 60 times more powerful than morphine.

What has been the government's response to these statistics? In a 2018 study of this topic made by the National Safety Council, it was determined that Pennsylvania's response was lagging in comparison to the response of other states, especially in the key areas of prescription guidelines and data sharing.

A good many people will look at these figures and statistics and think that none of these things affect me directly. But, as is the case in almost any crisis, the opioid crisis directly affects all of us. For instance, losing 42,000 young to middle-aged citizens in one year will:

- A. reduce the average life-span of the American people in general
- B. shrink the U.S. labor force
- C. stall economic growth by lowering productivity in the workplace.

The above facts just touch the surface of the overall costs of the opioid crisis on all of us as a society.

How does a user of a prescription medication become an addict? The first stage in the process is defined as misuse. In this stage a person will use medication prescribed to him for an earlier condition, or he or she will use medications prescribed for another person.

Next comes dependence. In this stage a person develops a tolerance for the medication which means that he or she will need to take more pills to get the same response as he or she had previously. In this stage a person usually develops a physical need for the medication.

Once the physical need stage is reached, a person will arrive at the addiction stage. Addiction is defined as a brain disease in which a person loses control of his or her daily functions because of drug use. In this stage drug use is classified as a chronic disease, and, as such, it has nothing to do with a person's moral failing or his or her lack of will power. In some people, the addiction stage can come as quickly as five days after beginning an opioid pain reliever prescription.

Can we identify those who are more likely to become addicted to opioids? While research on this topic is constantly updating our knowledge, certain character traits and experiences have recently been identified as risk factors for addiction. Among these are:

1. a personal history of anxiety and/or depression
2. a family history of alcohol and/or drug abuse
3. long-term use of opioid pain medications

Finally, because society in general neglected to recognize opioids as a problem for everyone, we are just at the beginning stages of looking for ways to combat the crisis. Much more work has to be done especially in the areas of identification of those who are addicted and the development of comprehensive treatment plans. What we have now is merely a beginning.