

Overdose

Emergency Department factsheets

What is an overdose?

An overdose occurs when too much of a drug, medication or poison is taken, which may result in a toxic effect on the body. Many substances can cause harm when taken in excess including alcohol, illegal (and 'party') drugs, prescription and over-the-counter medication, and some herbal remedies.

Why do people overdose?

There are two main reasons people overdose.

- Accidental – a person takes the wrong substance (a drug or medication) or the wrong combination, in the wrong amount or at the wrong time, not knowing that it could cause them harm.
- Intentional misuse – a person takes an overdose to get 'high' or to cause deliberate harm. Any deliberate harm may be a cry for help or a suicide attempt. This may arise in a crisis such as a relationship breakdown or the death of a loved one. On the other hand, the person may be suffering from a mental health condition such as depression or schizophrenia.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms will depend on the substance, the amount taken and the person's bodily constitution. Some poisons only cause minor distress or harm while others can cause serious problems and possibly death.

Symptoms can include:

- nausea and vomiting
- dizziness
- high or low blood pressure
- fitting (seizures)
- drowsiness, confusion or coma (the person is unconscious)

- organ damage or failure (especially the liver or kidneys)
- breathing problems
- respiratory or cardiac arrest – when the person stops breathing or their heart stops beating/pumping blood around the body.

Treatment

A range of treatments are available, depending on the substance taken and the person's medical needs.

- Blood tests, ECG (heart rhythm trace).
- Intravenous fluids (into the vein) or medication – usually to improve low blood pressure.
- Observation in hospital and monitoring of the person's vital signs and heart rhythms (if necessary).
- Limiting the amount of substance in the body (such as using activated charcoal, which binds to some drugs so the body doesn't absorb it. This usually should be given within two hours of substance ingestion).
- An antidote may be given to reverse the effect of the toxic substance (for some drugs).
- Admission to hospital for further treatment.

If charcoal was given in hospital, it will be passed with the next bowel motion, in a day or two. Some people become constipated, so drink plenty of water to stop this happening. Charcoal may also absorb other medications.

For those who have had a sedating overdose, it is recommended not to drive for three (3) days following overdose as there is an increased risk of motor vehicle accident.

If you are discharged home, you may need to follow up with your local doctor for more blood tests within a couple of days to make sure there is no delayed damage to the liver or kidneys. Your doctor will advise you if this is necessary.

What to expect

- Many overdoses do not cause serious harm or long-term damage and most people make a full recovery.
- Some overdoses can cause damage to organs such as the liver and kidneys, and may result in death.
- If the overdose was an attempt at self-harm or suicide, ongoing treatment and follow up will be arranged before the person is sent home.

Prevention

To avoid a drug overdose in future:

- take prescription medications as directed
- tell a doctor or health professional of any previous overdose
- keep all medications and poisons locked away in a safe secure place out of reach of children
- keep all medications in original packaging or ask your pharmacist about medication dose administration aids.

First aid & seeking help

If you think someone has taken an overdose call the Poison Information Centre, even if they seem okay. The centre is open 24 hours a day, every day, Australia-wide.

Poisons Information Centre

Phone 13 11 26

In an emergency:

- Dial 000 and ask for an ambulance.
- Ask for the police if the person is violent.
- Do not try to make the person vomit.
- Bring any medication containers to the hospital.

In a medical emergency, go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000). For other medical problems see your local doctor or health-care professional.

Disclaimer: This health information is for general education purposes only. Please consult with your doctor or other health professional to make sure this information is right for you.

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