

Drug Overdose Education Sheet**Drug Overdose Introduction**

Drug overdose can affect all age groups, cultural groups, and genders. It can be accidental, or it can be intentional to cause harm to oneself. It occurs when an individual takes more than the recommended dose of medication, or when an individual has a sensitivity to a medication causing it to be poisonous. Each person reacts differently to drugs and a drug overdose, and reactions are hard to predict.

Drug overdose may also occur when an individual takes an illicit/recreational drug in large amounts to get high, and the body's metabolism cannot break down and get rid of the drug before side effects occur.

What are the symptoms of a drug overdose?

- Increased or decreased heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing that may be life threatening
- Changes in level of consciousness that may include sleepiness, confusion, or coma.
- Skin changes to include cool and clammy skin or hot and dry skin.
- Chest pain
- Shortness of breath
- Abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, and/or diarrhea
- Blood in vomitus or bowel movements

What do I do for a family member who may have taken too much medication?

If you suspect that a family member or friend has had a drug overdose, medical attention should be sought immediately. Sometimes an individual may need to be convinced to go to a hospital or a physician to seek medical care. If unsuccessful, the emergency medical services should be called to come to the person. Paramedics are trained professionals who can assist in this type of situation and in transporting the individual to the hospital.

You can assist the individual who has overdosed by attempting to find the containers of whatever drug or chemical was taken and bringing that to the hospital emergency room. This will assist the emergency room physician to determine what and how much was taken. It is also helpful to provide information such as the suspected time that the drug or chemical was taken.

How is an overdose diagnosed?

The physician will take a thorough health history and perform a physical exam. He/she will ask about past habits regarding drug intake, past medical history, and a list of current prescribed medications that the individual is taking.

Depending on the drug taken, the physician may order specific blood tests to measure the amount of drug in the blood stream. Other blood work may also be ordered to determine how the drug is affecting the body.

How is a drug overdose treated?

Treatment of an overdose is dependent on the drug or chemical taken , the amount, and the individual's condition.

- In the emergency room, the stomach may be emptied out by gastric lavage or "stomach pumping" to remove any of the drug or chemical that is still in the stomach.
- A substance called activated charcoal may be ordered. This binds to the drug or chemical and keeps it in the stomach and intestines so that the body does not absorb it into the blood stream. A medication may then be given to help the body get rid of the drug or chemical with bowel movements.
- Sometimes the individual may become agitated or violent from the drug taken. Every attempt is made to calm the individual to prevent him or her from hurting him/herself and others. In some situations, sedating medications may need to be given. For safety reasons, the individual may be temporarily put in physical restraints until he/she can be calmed down. The healthcare team go to great lengths to only use as much sedating medication and restraints needed to keep the individual safe.
- For some overdoses, other medications may be given to reverse the effects of the overdose drug or chemical taken. This works as an antidote to prevent further harm from the overdose drug. Some medications may be given to prevent or minimize harm to organs in the body.
- The physician may also order follow-up blood work to periodically test the amount of drug left in the body.

Follow up Care

After the initial phase of care when the individual is stabilized, follow up measures will be taken in attempt to prevent recurrence.

If the overdose was intentional, psychiatric care needs may be required. The physician may order a psychiatric consult and/or recommend placement on the behavioral health unit. If the overdose is due to abuse of illicit/recreational drugs, a mental health evaluation may also be recommended to assist the individual in addiction treatment

For children who accidentally took medications, safety prevention measures are important to take in the home to secure all medications, chemicals, and cleaning solutions out of their reach to prevent further overdoses. The treatment for an overdose may be very frightening to a child and they may need help in coping with the situation and understanding why it is important not to touch medication containers.

Sometimes adult elders in the home may be forgetful or confused and accidently take a drug overdose. As with children in these situations, care must be taken to secure out of reach all medications and chemicals. Supervision may be required when taking daily prescribed medications.

**If you have a poisoning emergency,
call the Poison Control Center at
1-800-222-1222.**

Source:
American Association of Poison Control Centers @
www.aapcc.org
Drug Overdose @ www.emedicinehealth.com

03/2008