

## 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. Intentional misuse of drugs may indicate a serious mental health problem and help should be sought even if the overdose has not caused you harm.

## What are the symptoms?

A wide variety of symptoms is possible. Symptoms will depend on the substance, the amount taken and your health. Some poisons only cause minor distress or harm while others can cause serious problems and possibly death.

Symptoms can include:

- nausea and vomiting
- burning in the throat or stomach (*oesophagitis* or *gastritis*) after drinking a corrosive substance
- 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
- There may be no symptoms, or only minor symptoms, even when severe damage is occurring in some overdoses (for example: paracetamol), so always seek medical help.

## Tests and treatment

The tests and treatment given depend on what the person took and their medical needs. There are a number of possible tests and treatments. Some treatments need to be given soon after an overdose to prevent serious harm. It is important to seek medical advice as soon as possible, even if there are no symptoms.

- 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).
- Removing the substance from the body (such as using activated charcoal, which binds to the drug so the body cannot absorb it – this must be given within an hour of substance ingestion). Charcoal is rarely given and works only on certain types of poisons.
- An antidote may be given to reverse the effect of the toxic substance (for some drugs).
- Admission to hospital for further treatment.

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:

- avoid illegal drugs of any kind
- take prescription medications as directed
- tell a doctor or health care professional of any previous medication problems
- ask your GP for available support systems in your area
- keep all medications and poisons locked away in a safe secure place out of reach of children
- keep all medications in original packaging
- if you take a number of medications each day, a pharmacy webster pack may be helpful to avoid overdose.

### First aid

- If you think someone has taken an overdose call the Poisons 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.

Notes:

## Seeking help



In a **medical emergency** go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).



Following an overdose, check with your local doctor or health care professional to ensure there is no delayed damage. You may need blood tests.



For health advice from a Registered Nurse you can call **NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day** on **1300 60 60 24** for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria.\*

**NURSE-ON-CALL** provides access to **interpreting services** for callers not confident with English. Call **1300 60 60 24**.

\*Calls from mobile calls may be charged at a higher rate



### Want to know more?

- Ask your local doctor or health care professional.
- Call the **Poisons Information Centre**  
Phone 13 11 26
- Phone **Lifeline** in a crisis  
Phone 13 11 14
- Visit the **Better Health Channel**  
[www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)
- **Direct Line** – a free, confidential drug and alcohol counselling service  
Phone 1800 888 236

If you would like to receive this publication in an **accessible format**, please phone 9096 0578 or email [edfactsheets@health.vic.gov.au](mailto:edfactsheets@health.vic.gov.au)



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