

# Opioid-related harms

Opioid overdoses and deaths are a public health crisis affecting many working Ontarians. Chronic use or misuse of opioids—such as using illegally produced opioids, mixing with other medications or alcohol, using opioids without a doctor’s supervision or taking more than prescribed—can result in serious harm or death.

**Opioid-related harm** is an umbrella term for the negative health outcomes that can be caused by opioids. They can include opioid use disorder, opioid poisoning (i.e., overdose), and death.

## Explain dangers

- Opioids are a class of drugs commonly prescribed for pain relief in the form of pills, syrups, sprays, patches, or suppositories. They can also be used recreationally to get high.
- Opioids can be prescribed as medications, including codeine, morphine, oxycodone, and fentanyl. But they can also be produced illegally and laced with illicit fentanyl or heroin.
- Workers who experience opioid-related harms can experience secondary harms, such as job loss or social isolation, and harm to others, such as emotional distress or physical injury.
- Workers in the trades are disproportionately impacted by opioid-related harms.
- About three-quarters of opioid overdoses in Canada occur amongst men. The trades are male-dominated industries: 92.8 per cent of tradespeople were male in Ontario as of 2022.
- Other long-term effects of chronic opioid use or misuse include increased tolerance, opioid use disorder, addiction, liver damage, withdrawal symptoms, and worsening pain.

## Identify controls

- All substance use and related harms in the workplace must be addressed as part of a wider substance use policy and program. If you already have a policy, make sure every worker is aware and knows how to access it.

- Reduce the risk of injuries and repetitive strain through safe work-practices and ergonomics. See IHSA’s [musculoskeletal disorders and ergonomics toolkit](#).
- Address systemic workplace barriers that may prevent workers from accessing the treatment they need. Review IHSA’s [Opioid use and workplace implications for trade sectors guide](#) (W132).
- As of June 1, 2023, employers must provide naloxone in the workplace if certain circumstances described in the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* apply. Employers who are required to provide naloxone kits in their workplaces must ensure that the worker who is responsible for the naloxone kit has received training.

IHSA recommends that all high-risk workplaces keep a naloxone kit on site and require naloxone training for their workers, such as IHSA’s [Naloxone training](#) eLearning

## Demonstrate

Take the time to educate yourself about opioid use, opioid use disorder, and addiction, and share this knowledge with everyone in your organization.

Read opioid and mental health-related resources, such as IHSA’s [Understanding opioid-related harms and the need for naloxone kits in construction workplaces guide](#) (W133), [Workplace mental health employer toolkit](#), or [Opioid crisis in the trades toolkit](#).

Assess the need for naloxone kits in your workplace by using the assessment tool on page 2 of IHSA’s [Frequently asked questions about naloxone kits in workplaces guide](#) (W135).