

Scripting for talking to patients and their loved ones about naloxone

This is suggested scripting for Kaiser Permanente Washington care teams to help in conversations about naloxone. Kaiser Permanente Washington chronic opioid therapy guidelines require naloxone be offered to all patients in the medium or high monitoring groups and is recommended for all patients taking opioid medicines. This script is provided as a helpful resource only; we encourage care teams to adapt however they see fit.

Scripting

I recommend all patients who take opioids also have the medication naloxone on hand, and I'd like to prescribe this to you today. Naloxone is a life-saving medicine that can reverse an overdose in an emergency. This is a medicine we offer to **all** our patients who are taking opioid medicines; it's a standard prescription meant to help keep patients and their loved ones safe.

Prescription opioids cause about 41 deaths each day in the United States.¹ Many of these deaths happen because people **accidentally overdose** on opioids prescribed for long-term pain. Anyone who takes opioids is at risk of accidental overdose and death. This is a risk for you with your current medicines, and is a risk for anyone else who may have access to your medicine cabinet.

You can keep the naloxone near your opioid medicine, so it's available just in case you ever need it. You should also show it to someone who is likely to be around in case you have an accidental overdose, so they can save your life. Although naloxone should only be used in an emergency, it won't cause any harm if it is given to someone who isn't actually experiencing an overdose. That's why I feel it is important to prescribe; it can do a lot of good and is unlikely to do any harm. It's my job to help keep you as safe as possible, and naloxone is one important way I can do that.

1. Wilson N, Kariisa M, Seth P, et al. [Drug and Opioid-Involved Overdose Deaths—United States, 2017–2018](#). MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2020;69:290–297.

Frequently Asked Questions

I only ever take my medicines as prescribed. Why do I have to get this extra prescription?

Most overdoses happen by accident. You may take an extra dose by mistake or take another drug that may cause a dangerous reaction. Someone you love may take your medicine by accident, even if you usually leave it in a safe place. Hopefully you will never need to use it, but keeping naloxone around means you'll be prepared to save a life if the worst happens.

I am on a low dose of opioids and I don't think I need naloxone. Why do I have to get this extra prescription?

While people taking lower doses of opioids are at lower risk of overdose, **everyone** who is taking opioid medicine is at risk, regardless of the dose. Most overdoses happen by accident. You may take an extra dose by mistake or take another drug that may cause a dangerous reaction. Someone you love may take your medicine by accident, even if you usually leave it in a safe place. Hopefully you will never need to use it, but keeping naloxone around means you'll be prepared to save a life if the worst happens.

Does this mean you think I have a problem with opioids?

No. We would like **everyone** who has an opioid prescription to have a naloxone prescription as well. This is part of our strategy at Kaiser Permanente Washington to keep our patients and their loved ones as safe as possible.

How much does naloxone cost?

For most patients with Kaiser Permanente Washington insurance, naloxone is a tier 1 (lowest cost) drug, which means it is priced like generic drugs you get from the pharmacy. For patients with Medicare insurance, naloxone is priced like brand drugs. Also, naloxone has 1.5 to 2-year shelf-life, so if you don't use it you won't need to replace it very often.

Does this mean the medicines I'm taking aren't safe?

Opioid medications have the potential to cause serious side effects including overdose and death, even when taken as prescribed. We ask you to come in for regular monitoring visits so we can do essential safety checks, but naloxone is important to have at home in case of an emergency. If you would like to consider less risky ways to manage your pain, we can explore different options together.

What is an opioid overdose?

An opioid overdose is a serious condition that can cause people to pass out and stop breathing. Without immediate help, an opioid overdose is likely to cause death. An opioid overdose is more likely if a person takes a high dose of opioid medicine or combines opioid medicine with alcohol or sedating drugs (such as benzodiazepines, muscle relaxants, or sleep medicines). However, opioid overdoses can happen even when a person takes their medication exactly as prescribed and doesn't take any of these other high risk medicines.

How do I know if someone is having an opioid overdose?

A person who is experiencing an overdose will be 1) unresponsive (even if you yell their name or try to shake or pinch them awake) and 2) not breathing or breathing very slowly (less than 1 breath every 5 seconds). The person may also have blue lips or fingertips.

How do I use naloxone?

The naloxone packaging has step by step instructions on it, so you don't need to memorize this information, but I'm happy to talk you through the process and answer your questions.

Naloxone is a nasal spray and is easy to administer. Naloxone should be given to a person having an overdose right away, just before calling 911. To administer naloxone: 1) lay the person on their back, 2) tilt their head back by supporting their neck with your hands, 3) insert the spray device all the way into one nostril, and 4) push the plunger. When you call 911, tell them where you are and that the person who needs help is not breathing.

If you fear an opioid overdose, it is safe to give naloxone. Naloxone helps the person wake up and keep breathing. The person will go into withdrawal, which is unpleasant but not life-threatening.

How does naloxone work?

Naloxone is an opioid antagonist. That means it reverses and blocks the effects of opioids. Naloxone can quickly restore normal breathing to a person if their breathing has slowed or stopped because of an opioid overdose. Naloxone has no effect on someone who does not have opioids in their system.

Other information for care teams

If patients have remaining questions

You can encourage patients to ask a pharmacist about naloxone when they pick up any prescription.

- If they are willing to get a naloxone prescription, you can encourage them to bring the friend or family member who may dispense naloxone in an emergency to the pharmacy to learn how to use naloxone.
- If they still have concerns about naloxone, you can encourage them to ask a pharmacist for more information about naloxone when they pick up their opioids or other medicines.

Naloxone expiration dates

Kaiser Permanente Washington pharmacies are required to put an expiration date for naloxone one year after dispensing, but the manufacturer often has their own expiration date (printed on the box). Especially if patients are concerned about cost, you can assure them that naloxone will be effective through the manufacturer's expiration date and likely beyond that date. The medicine will lose potency over time but could still save a life in an emergency. Something is better than nothing!

Helpful metaphors for naloxone

It could be helpful to use a metaphor to explain why naloxone is so important. Here are some ideas:

- Naloxone is like a fire extinguisher. You keep it around just in case there is a fire. You only need to replace it if you use it or if it is expired. You hope you never need to use the fire extinguisher, but you know having it around helps keep you and your loved ones safe.
- Naloxone is like an epi pen. If you have a severe allergy, you know you are at risk of an allergic reaction that could lead to death. Carrying an epi pen is one way you can prepare for a potential emergency. When you are taking opioid medicines, you are at risk just like a person with a severe allergy is at risk. Having naloxone is one way you can prepare for a potential emergency.

Other ways to explain an overdose

Some patients may think an overdose only happens if someone takes a lot of opioid medicines, or if they increase their dose. It may be helpful to explain that an overdose could also occur if there are changes in the body that affect medicine absorption, even if that person is taking a consistent dose. Because of that, an overdose could be caused by unforeseen drug interactions or unexpected changes in health or organ function.

