



Health Advisory

March 19, 2019

Update Regarding Misuse and Abuse of Prescription Opioids

This Health Advisory is being issued to bring ongoing attention to the alarming trend and national epidemic of misuse and abuse of prescription opioids and sedatives as well as a concerning shift towards the illegal use of high potency opioids such as fentanyl. As our communities and families face the devastation of loss associated with addiction and misuse of these drugs we call attention to the need for families and health care professionals to be aware of the scope of this epidemic as well as stringent guidelines for prescribing and disposal of unwanted prescription medications.

Nationally, each year, prescription narcotics result in more fatal overdoses than heroin and cocaine combined. Add to this that the second leading cause of fatal overdoses are prescription sedatives — medicines like Xanax and Ativan - and we are compelled to recognize and address the unintended consequence that may result from the misuse of these medications. Parallel with this trend is a resurgence in overdoses related to heroin abuse and illegally manufactured fentanyl.

Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reveals that there were 53 accidental drug overdose deaths in 2003 in Contra Costa County. For 2017, the number had nearly doubled to 105, with opioids a major contributing factor in many. In Contra Costa County in 2010, there were 33 opioid overdose deaths. When examining more recent overdose deaths related to the opioids, preliminary data for 2018 reveals twice that number - 66 opioid related overdose deaths up from 52 in 2017. This is despite significant progress across the medical community in prescribing fewer opioids and expanding access to drug treatment services.

Of profound concern is the trend that underlies these occurrences. What we are experiencing in our County is, tragically, mirrored across the Nation. Information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reveals that the death rate from drug overdose has more than doubled since 2000 and on a national level has claimed the lives of more than 500,000 individuals since then. On a national scale, in 2010 there were 38,329 deaths associated with drug overdose. In 2017, tragically, these numbers had close to doubled, with 70,237 overdose deaths reported across the Nation. Of those deaths in 2017, 47,600 or nearly 68% were associated with opioids. While the misuse of prescription painkillers continues to be a problem there has been a surge in deaths related to the misuse of synthetic street opioids such as illegally manufactured fentanyl.

<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db329.htm> Drug overdose has now far eclipsed automobile accidents as the number one cause of accidental death among individuals age 25-64.
<https://wonder.cdc.gov/>

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, prescription opioid sales in the United States quadrupled between 1999 and 2010. *CDC Vital Signs MMWR 2011:60(43); 1487-1492*. Between 1999 and 2017, the number of deaths attributed to opioid pain relievers, such as morphine, codeine,



hydrocodone, and oxycodone, had increased by more the 500%.
<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db329.htm>

A Call to Action:

Counties, health systems and community partners across the greater bay area are galvanized in their efforts to address this epidemic. Closer to home, the Alameda-Contra Costa Medical Association together with local public health agencies, health insurers, behavioral health providers, community partners and health care provider organizations are calling for Emergency Departments, Urgent Care Centers and Primary Care clinicians to adopt a set of guidelines for prescribing opioids. These guidelines are intended to help balance the need for the treatment of pain with the very real risk of drug dependency, abuse and addiction. Electronic copies of the guidelines and other helpful information can be downloaded from www.EastBaySafeRX.org. In addition, health systems are expanding the availability of substance use disorder treatment programs and medication assisted treatment.

Naloxone, an opioid antagonist that can reverse life threatening opioid overdoses, can be obtained for family and friends of people taking prescribed and non-prescribed opioids. Pharmacists can provide this drug without a prescription and many insurance companies cover this medication when prescribed by health providers. It has been shown, that when Naloxone is made available for use by trained non-medical people, it can reduce opioid related deaths.

Diversion of prescription opioids (use by others for whom the drug was not prescribed) is one of the risk conditions for the misuse of this drug. Contra Costa County was among the first in the Nation to adopt a Safe Drug Disposal Ordinance that requires drug manufacturers to implement a system of safe drug disposal. In September of 2018 the program was implemented in the County and you can now find a number of disposal kiosk located at pharmacies and health facilities across the County. Go to <https://med-project.org/> and type in your zip code to find a disposal kiosk near you.

Prescription drug abuse is a complex social problem that requires new dialogue, innovative solutions and the engagement of our health care community. Launched in May 2015, East Bay Safe Prescribing Coalition brings together stakeholders across sectors, including physicians, pharmacists, schools, law enforcement agencies, public health officials and concerned community members to design and implement local strategies for prevention and awareness. Efforts by regional health care delivery systems and health insurers have shown positive results in reducing the number of prescriptions for opioid-based pain medication. In addition, the Contra Costa MEDS (Medication Education and Disposal Safety) Coalition is a community based effort that has engaged multiple sectors, communities and partners to advance awareness and develop local strategies to help prevent the misuse of prescription medication. Individuals interested in joining coalition efforts are encouraged to contact Coalition chair, April Rovero, at 925-980-5490.

Individuals seeking confidential assistance with drug abuse treatment can contact the Contra Costa Behavioral Health Access Line at 1-800-846-1652. The Access Line offers 24-hour availability for information, referral, and crisis support; appointment scheduling and comprehensive screenings are completed Monday-Friday 8:00am to 5:00. Providers or the Public can also contact the California Poison Control Center at: 1-800-222-1222. For more information go to: <http://www.samhsa.gov/prescription-drug-miuse-abuse> or from the CDC at http://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/states/state_prevention.html



In addition, the California Department of Public Health's opioid overdose surveillance dashboard provides county level comparisons of overdose deaths, emergency room visit rates and opioid prescribing patterns. <https://discovery.cdph.ca.gov/CDIC/ODdash/>

