

# Factsheet: Opioids - the Irish situation

August 2023

## Table of Contents

<b>Table of Contents .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Glossary of terms.....	1
What are opioids? .....	2
How do we know how many people use opioids in Ireland? .....	2
How many people use opioids in Ireland? .....	2
How many people use opiates from the National Drug and Alcohol survey (NDAS)? .....	3
Opioid pain relievers .....	3
How many people receive treatment for opioid use? .....	4
How many people die from using opioids? .....	5
Non-fatal overdoses and drug-related emergencies .....	6
What does the law say about opioids? .....	6
Seizures of opioids.....	6
References.....	7

## Glossary of terms

**Last month prevalence** – refers to the proportion of the sample that reported using a named drug in the 30-day period prior to the survey. Last month prevalence is often referred to as current use. A proportion of those reporting current use may be occasional (or first-time) users who happen to have used in the period leading up to the survey. It should therefore be noted that current use is not synonymous with regular use.

**Last year prevalence** – refers to the proportion of the sample that reported using a named drug in the year prior to the survey. Last year prevalence is often referred to as recent use.

**Lifetime prevalence** – refers to the proportion of the sample that reported ever having used the named drug at the time they were surveyed. A person who records lifetime prevalence may or may not be currently using the drug. Lifetime prevalence should not be interpreted as meaning that people have necessarily used a drug over a long period of time or that they will use the drug again in future.

**Prevalence** – refers to the proportion of a population that has used a drug over a particular time period.

## What are opioids?

Opioids are natural, synthetic, or semi-synthetic chemicals that interact with opioid receptors on nerve cells in the body and brain, and reduce the intensity of pain signals and feelings of pain. This class of drugs includes the semisynthetic drug heroin (diamorphine), synthetic opioids such as fentanyl, and pain medications available legally by prescription.<sup>1</sup>

**Opiates** refer to natural opioids such as morphine and codeine.

**Opioids** refer to all natural, semisynthetic, and synthetic opioids.

**Opioid analgesics** (prescription opioids) are medications that have been used to treat moderate to severe pain in some patients, and include:

- Natural opioid analgesics, such as morphine and codeine,
- Semi-synthetic opioid analgesics, such as drugs such as oxycodone, hydrocodone, hydromorphone, and oxymorphone,
- Methadone, a synthetic opioid that can be prescribed for pain reduction or for use in Medication-assisted treatment (MAT– treatment for opioid use disorder combining the use of medications (methadone, buprenorphine, or naltrexone) with counseling and behavioral therapies),
- Synthetic opioid analgesics other than methadone, such as drugs such as tramadol and fentanyl.

Naloxone is a drug that can reverse the effects of opioid overdose and can be lifesaving if administered in time.

## How do we know how many people use opioids in Ireland?

Researchers in Ireland use a number of sources of information to estimate problematic opioid use in Ireland. One way to measure is the four-source capture-recapture method. Three of the four data sources that have been used were derived from the Central Treatment List (CTL), which is a register of the number of people who are receiving methadone or another opioid as a substitute drug treatment, (clinics, general practitioners (GPs) and prisons) and the fourth data source was derived from the Probation Service.

## How many people use opioids in Ireland?

Using multi-source methods, in 2014 there were an estimated 18,988 opiate users in Ireland, a rate of 6.18 per 1,000 of the population aged 15-64.<sup>2</sup> The 2022 study, *Problematic opioid use in Ireland, 2015–2019*<sup>3</sup>, found that there were an estimated 19,875 problematic opioid users in Ireland in 2019, which equates to a prevalence rate of 6.68 per 1,000 population.

According to the EU drugs agency (EMCDDA) about 1 million Europeans used heroin or another illicit opioid in 2020. Opioids, often in combination with other substances, were found in around three quarters of fatal overdoses reported in the EU for 2020.<sup>4</sup>

## How many people use opiates from the National Drug and Alcohol survey (NDAS)?

Every four years a survey of the general population takes place to estimate the number of people in Ireland who use alcohol and other drugs. Face-to-face interviews take place with respondents aged 15+ normally resident in households in Ireland. This type of survey is not designed to include people who do not normally live in private households, such as prisoners or hostel dwellers. (For other populations, see our [prevalence sources](#).)

Drug prevalence surveys were undertaken in 2002–03, 2006–07, 2010–11, and 2014–15. The most recent survey 2019–20 National Drug and Alcohol Survey (NDAS), which took place in the Republic of Ireland, was managed by the Health Research Board. It should be noted that although the NDAS includes questions on the prevalence of heroin use, the numbers included in the sample are too small for reliable prevalence estimates. The authors suggest that their data is used in conjunction with other study methods, such as the capture-recapture method, to estimate the prevalence of high-risk drug users.

The 2019–20 NDAS survey involved 5,762 people in Ireland.<sup>5</sup> Results showed that:

- The majority of opiate users (13,458) are resident in Co. Dublin and 5,530 in the rest of the state.
- 70% (13,022) of opiate users were male and 30% (5,966) were female.
- Approximately two thirds of opiate users (11,224) were in the 35 to 64 age group.

**Table 1: Lifetime, last year and last month prevalence of heroin use among 15–64-year-olds (%)**

	2002–03	2006–07	2010–11	2014–15	2019–20
Lifetime	0.5	0.4	0.8	0.9	0.3
Last year	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.0
Last month	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0

**Table 2: Lifetime, last year and last month prevalence of methadone use among 15–64-year-olds (%)**

	2002–03	2006–07	2010–11	2014–15	2019–20
Lifetime	0.3	0.4	0.5	0.7	0.2
Last year	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.1
Last month	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.0

## Opioid pain relievers

The 2019–20 NDAS general population survey asked multiple questions about opioid pain relievers, such as codeine, (please see the report for more detail).<sup>5</sup>

**Table 3: Lifetime, last year and last month prevalence of opioid pain reliever+ use among 15–64-year-olds (%)**

	2010–11	2014–15	2019–20
Lifetime	38.8	63.8	54.7
Last year	27.9	45.8	33.4
Last month	14.2	21.0	13.1

Note: The results for opioid pain relievers are not comparable with the 2002–03 and the 2006–07 surveys and are therefore not presented here.

**Table 4: Type of opioid pain reliever used by current users in the last 30 days (%)**

Type of opioid pain reliever (N=751)	%
Over the counter (OTC) codeine products	80.2
Prescription codeine (e.g. Panadeine Forte)	14.4
Tramadol	4.0
Pregabalin	1.2
Morphine, hydromorphone	1.0
Oxycodone 0.8	0.8
Fentanyl	0.2
Other	3.7

The NDAS results in relation to opioid pain relievers showed that:

- 53.1% of respondents had ever used opioid pain relievers in their lifetime, corresponding to 1,834,000 of the general population in Ireland aged 15 years and older.
- 32.2% of respondents (or 1,258,000 of the general population) and 13.1% of respondents (or 512,000 of the general population) had used opioid pain relievers in the last year and last month, respectively.
- 1.8% of respondents (or 70,000 of the general population) had used opioid pain relievers in a non-medical way in the last 12 months.
- The average age of first opioid pain reliever use was 25.1 years (median: 20 years).
- The average age of respondents who reported recent opioid pain reliever use was 44.4 years (median: 43 years).

For further information on opioid use (prevalence and treatment) by County see our [Regional data factsheets](#).

## How many people receive treatment for opioid use?

The total number of clients in receipt of opioid substitution treatment (outside prisons) as of the end of August 2022 was 10,821 and is -0.3% below the expected activity level of 10,849.<sup>6</sup>

The HRB's [National Drug Treatment Reporting System](#) (NDTRS) provides data on treated drug and alcohol misuse in Ireland.

Opioids (mainly heroin) were the second most common main problem drug reported in 2022. Heroin accounted for 86.6% of all opioid cases in 2022. The proportion of cases treated for opioids decreased from 47.0% in 2016 to 33.1% in 2022. However, between 2021 and 2022, the number of opioid cases increased by 342 from 3,629 in 2021 to 3,971 in 2022.<sup>7</sup>

Of the 3,971 cases who reported opiates as their main problem drug in 2022:

- 597 (13.4%) were new cases.
- 3,133 (45.7%) were previously treated cases.
- Opioids were reported as an additional substance by 21.7% of cases with polydrug use in 2022. There have been small fluctuations in the proportion since 2016 (21.4%).

**Table 5: Main problem drug (excluding alcohol) reported in 30 days prior to treatment, NDTRS 2016 to 2022**

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
<b>All cases</b>	9227	8922	10274	10664	9702	10769	12009
Opioids	4341 (47.0)	4016 (45.0)	4349 (42.3)	4133 (38.8)	3559 (36.7)	3629 (33.7)	3971 (33.1)
<b>New cases</b>	3626	3257	3962	3979	3796	4206	4456
Opioids	950 (26.9)	809 (24.8)	719 (18.1)	676 (17.0)	550 (14.5)	530 (12.6)	597 (13.4)
<b>Previously treated cases</b>	5335	5242	5872	5927	5441	6090	6860
Opioids	3204 (60.1)	3037 (57.9)	3478 (59.2)	3244 (54.7)	2856 (52.5)	2930 (48.1)	3133 (45.7)

For more detailed treatment data (age, gender, employment status) up to 2021 see the library's [interactive tables](#). In the tables, 'other opioids' includes street/non medically used opium and morphine, codeine, synthetic opiates and opiate agonist-antagonists, as well as substitute opiates/opioids used as part of a drug treatment programme.

## How many people die from using opioids?

The HRB's [National Drug-Related Deaths Index](#) (NDRDI) is a database which records cases of death by drug and alcohol poisoning, and deaths among drug users and those who are alcohol dependent. 409 people died from poisoning in 2020.<sup>8</sup>

Opiates were the main drug group implicated in poisoning deaths in Ireland in 2020:

- Methadone was the most common single prescribable drug; it was implicated in 139 poisonings.
- Heroin poisoning deaths increased from 64 deaths in 2011 to 113 deaths in 2020.

**Table 6: Opioids implicated in poisoning deaths, NDRDI 2011-2020**

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
All poisoning deaths	314	281	341	319	327	314	340	354	371	409

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Any opioid implicated	213	182	207	215	219	205	220	240	258	282
<b>Individual drug</b>										
Heroin	64	64	88	97	84	74	89	98	106	113
Methadone	116	87	94	105	91	105	101	122	123	139
<b>Polydrug poisonings</b>										
More than one opioid implicated	45	39	46	46	43	44	47	58	52	77

## Non-fatal overdoses and drug-related emergencies

According to the [Hospital In-Patient Enquiry \(HIPE\)](#) scheme, 5,402 cases of non-fatal overdose were discharged from Irish hospitals in 2020. Opiates were used in 16.6% (897) of cases.<sup>9</sup>

## What does the law say about opioids?

Heroin and other opiates are on the list of controlled drugs under the Misuse of Drugs Acts 1977 and 1984 and amending regulations. Under the legislation a person who has this controlled drug in their possession is guilty of an offence. You can find more information about Irish drug laws, offences and penalties on the [Citizens Information Board website](#).

## Seizures of opioids

The Garda send drugs seized to [Forensic Science Ireland \(FSI\)](#) for analysis. From 2004, the number of heroin seizures analysed increased, reaching a peak in 2007 (1,698). Although heroin seizures subsequently decreased almost every year between 2007 and 2013, a substantial increase occurred between 2013 and 2014 (38%). Although an increase was evident between 2015 and 2016 (35%), decreases were shown from 2014 to 2015 (21%) and from 2016 to 2017 (25%), and an even larger decrease was shown between 2017 and 2018 (60%). The number of heroin seizures analysed in 2019 was more than four times higher than 2018. The number of diamorphine seizures analysed in 2020 was 21% lower than 2019. While a decrease of heroin seizures analysed was evident between 2019 and 2020, between 2020 and 2021 heroin seizures analysed increased by 38% (388). In addition, FSI analysis determined that traces of diamorphine were present in 19 seizures in 2021. Three seizures contained more than one product: diamorphine and cocaine (2) and diamorphine, cocaine and MDMA (1).<sup>10</sup>

Other opioids: Following a peak in the total number of seizures in 2014, the number of seizures of drugs in this category declined year on year, with the number of seizures in 2018 being approximately 77% lower than in 2014. However, in 2019, the total number of seizures analysed (N=66) was nearly four and-a-half times higher than in 2018 (N=15). A slight increase was evident between 2019 and 2020 (15%). The number of other opioids decreased by 4% between 2020 and 2021. This decrease can possibly be explained by the decrease in methadone analysis (51%).

Methadone has been the most prominent drug in this category since 2012 and accounted for 27% of products in this category in 2021, followed by Morphine (n=16) and Oxycodone (n=10).<sup>10</sup>

## References

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### Further reading:

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### How to cite this factsheet:

HRB National Drugs Library (2023) Opioids - the Irish situation. Dublin: HRB National Drugs Library, [www.drugsandalcohol.ie/17313](http://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/17313)

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