

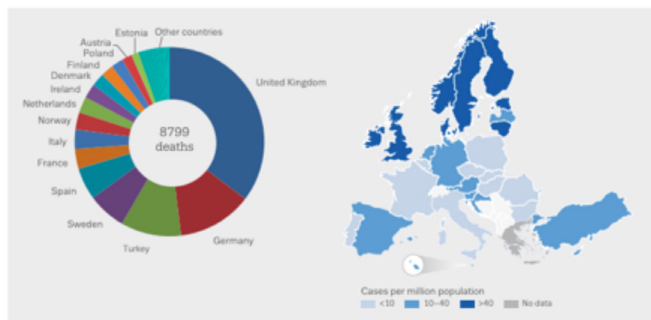
# Factsheet



## Opioid Overdose (OD)

Overdose (OD) is the leading cause of avoidable death among people who use drugs (PWUD). Drug OD deaths have risen consecutively in Europe the past five years, approximately 80-90% of these preventable deaths are linked to the use of opioids.<sup>1</sup> Opioid OD is treatable with naloxone if administered in a timely manner. Naloxone is an inexpensive medication that reverses the effects of opioids and plays an important role in mediating the potential harms associated with opioid OD (including death). Nearly half of all PWUD using opioids experience an OD and 70% witness an OD<sup>2</sup>.

FIGURE 1  
Drug-induced deaths in the European Union, Norway and Turkey: total number and mortality rates among adults aged 15-64



Source: EMCDDA Drug-Related Deaths and Mortality in Europe, 2019<sup>3</sup>

### What are Opioids?

Opioids are substances either derived from the opium poppy (morphine, heroin) or synthetic analogues like fentanyl, they all have similar effects in the body. These substances can be both illicit (such as heroin) or prescription medications (such as oxycodone or tramadol). Synthetic opioids (such as fentanyl and its analogues) have been involved in a large number of deaths in some countries in Europe.<sup>3</sup>

### What Happens During Opioid Overdose?

All opioids slow the respiratory system. During an OD the breathing slows so much it causes low levels of oxygen. The lack of oxygen in the brain can lead to cardiac arrest, brain injury and without intervention, death.<sup>2</sup>

### Signs of Overdose

- No response to stimuli
- Shallow/stopped breathing
- Can't be woken up
- Unusual snoring /gurgling sounds
- Blue/grey lips or finger tips
- Floppy arms and legs

### What Puts People at Higher Risk of OD?

- Loss of tolerance to opioids (such as during incarceration, hospitalization or periods of abstinence)
- Use in combination with benzodiazepines or alcohol
- Presence of Fentanyl or other synthetic opioids<sup>3</sup>
- Using alone
- Underlying diseases like HIV, lung disease or liver and kidney disease<sup>2</sup>

## What Strategies Can Be Used to Prevent Opioid OD?

### Interventions to reduce opioid-related deaths

#### Reducing fatal outcome of overdose

**Supervised drug consumption**  
Immediate first-aid in drug emergencies

**Take-home naloxone programmes**  
Improved bystander response

#### Reducing risk of overdose

**Retention in opioid substitution treatment**  
Reduce drug use and injecting

**Overdose risk assessments**  
In treatment facilities and prisons

**Overdose awareness**  
Knowledge of risk and safer use

#### Reducing vulnerability

**Outreach and low-threshold services**  
Accessible services

**Enabling environment**  
Removing barriers to service provision

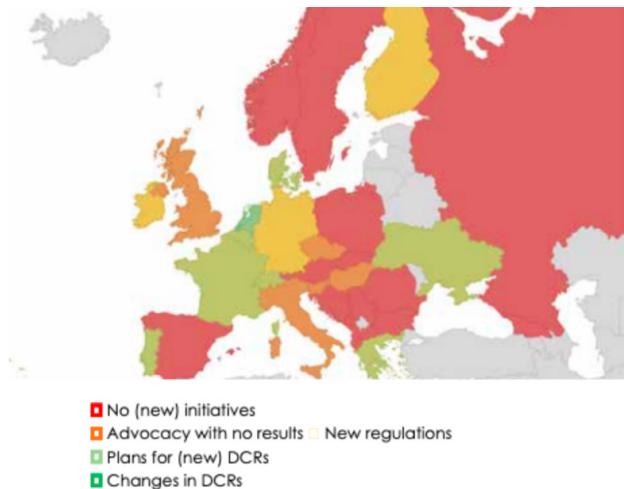
**Empowerment of drug users**  
Enabling drug users to protect themselves

**Public health approach**  
Recognition of wider impact

Source: EMCDDA Drug-Related Deaths and Mortality in Europe, 2019<sup>3</sup>

### Reducing Fatal OD:

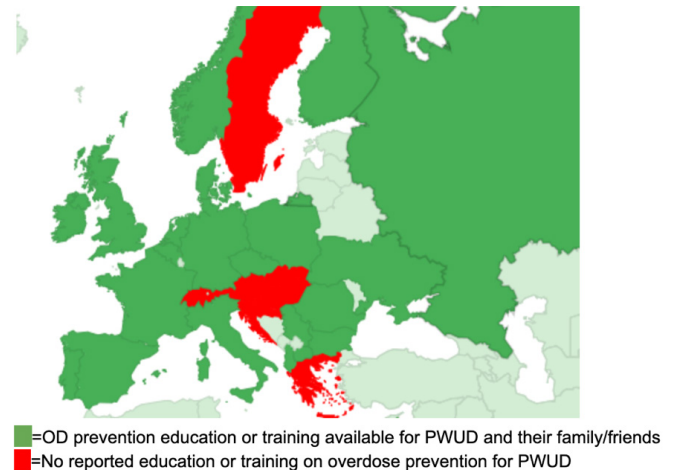
- Naloxone should be available to all people likely to witness an OD (PWUD and their friends/family members).<sup>2</sup> Naloxone should be increased in the community via Take-home naloxone programs (THN) and policy-makers should work to remove other existing barriers to distribution.<sup>1,4</sup>
- Drug Consumption Rooms (DCR's) should be prioritized by policy-makers and implemented as a part of evidence-based and cost-effective overdose prevention.



C-EHRN 2019 Monitoring on Status of DCR's<sup>4</sup>

### Reducing Risk of OD:

- Expand Opiate Substitution Therapy (OST), to provide a safe, oral alternative to opioids OST needs to be available for all PWUD and without barriers like abstinence. Buprenorphine carries the additional benefit of protection from overdose by containing naloxone.<sup>2</sup>
- OD awareness and prevention education needs to be expanded for all PWUD and their family and friends. Last year seven countries reported no education and training on OD for this population.<sup>4</sup> OD risk assessment needs to be carried out by all staff in-contact with PWUD, particularly in prisons and medical settings.



C-EHRN 2019 Monitoring on OD Prevention Education<sup>4</sup>

### References

1. "Drug Overdoses Can Be Prevented — New Resources Released | [www.emcdda.europa.eu](http://www.emcdda.europa.eu)." n.d. Accessed May 28, 2020. [https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/news/2019/7/overdose-awareness-day\\_en](https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/news/2019/7/overdose-awareness-day_en).
2. "Drug-Related Deaths and Mortality in Europe: Update from the EMCDDA Expert Network | [www.emcdda.europa.eu](http://www.emcdda.europa.eu)." n.d. Accessed April 24, 2020. <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/rapid-communications/drug-related-deaths-in-europe-2018>.
3. "WHO | Information Sheet on Opioid Overdose." 2018, August. [https://www.who.int/substance\\_abuse/information-sheet/en/](https://www.who.int/substance_abuse/information-sheet/en/).
4. van der Gouwe D. Schiffer K. Perez Gayo R. Schatz E., T. T. R. M. M. S. D. Civil Society Monitoring of Harm Reduction in Europe, Data Report 2019. (2020).

### Reducing Vulnerability:

1. The World Health Organization (WHO) supports monitoring OD deaths on a national level and collecting data on available harm reduction services.<sup>2</sup>
2. Outreach and low-barrier services by harm reduction agencies are key to engaging this vulnerable population and preventing OD in the community. Policy makers need to involve civil society in data collection, analysis and decision making on OD prevention policies and practices in order to implement best practices in OD prevention.<sup>4</sup>