

# How to save a life

## Emergency response to a drug overdose, and harm reduction advice

An overdose occurs when there is too much of a drug (or drugs) in the body at one time.

Overdoses are medical emergencies that can be life threatening.



# Overdose signs

Overdose signs can vary but might include:



**being unresponsive**  
(will not wake when shaken)



**snoring or noisy breathing**



**blue or pale lips and skin**



**seizures or fits.**

**Drugs have different effects and can result in different signs of overdose.**

<b>Downers</b>	<b>Uppers</b>
<p><b>Downer overdose signs</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• slowed breathing and heart rate</li><li>• pinpoint pupils</li><li>• confusion</li><li>• cold, clammy skin</li></ul>	<p><b>Upper overdose signs</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• rapid breathing and heart rate</li><li>• chest pain</li><li>• hallucinating</li><li>• overheating</li><li>• rigid muscles</li><li>• anxiety or panic</li></ul>
<p><b>Example downers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• benzodiazepines (benzos, diazepam)</li><li>• opioids (heroin, methadone)</li><li>• gabapentin and pregabalin</li><li>• alcohol</li></ul>	<p><b>Example uppers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• cocaine (coke, crack)</li><li>• mephedrone (mcat)</li><li>• amphetamine (speed)</li><li>• MDMA (ecstasy)</li></ul>

# If someone overdoses

1. Stay calm and shout for help.
2. **Call 999** and ask for an ambulance.
3. Tell them your location and what's happened.
4. Be open about the substances taken.
5. Follow the call handler's instructions.

**If they do not respond to a shout or a shake, check their breathing. Call 999.**



## **If they're breathing**

- put them in the recovery position (on their side)
- give naloxone
- monitor breathing
- after 2-3 minutes give naloxone again.

## **If they're not breathing**

- put them on their back
- give 30 chest compressions followed by two rescue breaths
- give naloxone
- repeat cycles of chest compressions, rescue breaths and naloxone.



**Continue cycle until person responds or paramedics arrive.**

**After calling 999, there are things you can do to help the person while you wait for help to arrive.**

### **If someone is distressed**

- speak to them calmly
- take them somewhere quiet.



### **If someone is overheating**

- take them somewhere cool
- loosen tight clothing
- cool them with a fan or wet towel.



### **If someone is having seizures**

- do not restrain them
- remove objects that could cause harm.



# Reducing the harm

The unregulated drug supply is increasingly toxic and unpredictable. Getting support and treatment reduces the risk of experiencing harm or dying from an overdose. Your local drug service can provide information, support and treatment: **[www.scottishdrugservices.com](http://www.scottishdrugservices.com)**

- Test drugs using the free and anonymous postal service **[www.wedinos.org](http://www.wedinos.org)**
- Avoid mixing drugs, including alcohol and medicines.
- Dose low. Take the smallest amount you can.
- Go slow. Leave a long a gap in between doses.
- Use drugs in the company of other people, and take turns to dose.
- Avoid injecting. If you do inject, use new equipment. You can get this from your local needle exchange service.

# Carry naloxone

If someone is not responding, naloxone should be given, even if it's unclear what drugs were taken.



- Naloxone is a life-saving medicine that can reverse an opioid overdose temporarily. It comes as a nose spray or injection.
- Give doses one at a time, waiting 2–3 minutes between each dose.
- Get naloxone from your local drug service or order online from [www.sfad.org.uk](http://www.sfad.org.uk)

Naloxone works on opioid drugs but it will not cause the person any harm if opioids have not been used.

For more information, visit NHS inform:

[www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/drugs-and-drug-use](http://www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/drugs-and-drug-use)



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