

The Opioid Epidemic

The Problem:

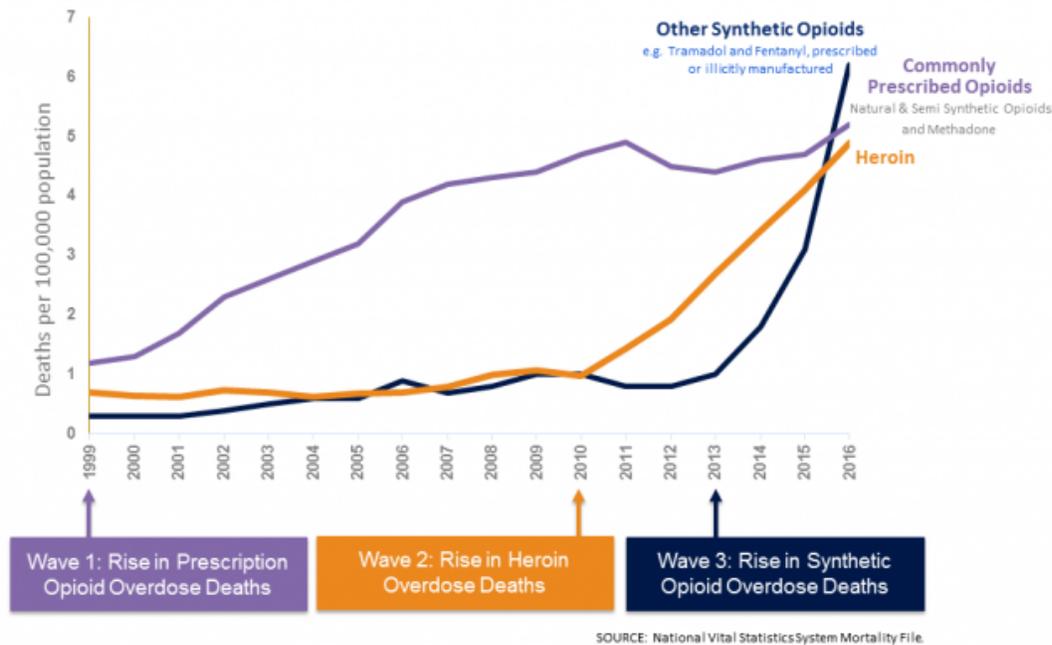
Opioids are a class of narcotic drugs that have historically been used to treat pain. Opioids work by binding to receptors in the brain to block dopamine and depress the central nervous system. There are opioid medications that are legally prescribed as well as opioids that are sold and obtained illicitly. There are risks associated with the use of any opioid, and adverse effects can include slow and shallow breathing and a decrease in mental functioning. These can ultimately lead to death. Opioids may also be misused to produce a euphoric effect. With continued use, a person's tolerance increases needing a greater quantity of the opioid to feel an effect and a dependence on the opioid resulting in addiction.

Opioids that are legitimately prescribed by clinicians to control pain include oxycodone, hydrocodone, and prescription fentanyl. Opioid prescribing and availability of opioid pain relievers increased markedly in the 1990s, leading to increased opportunity for adverse events as well as misuse. A concomitant increase in prescription opioid deaths was recognized in 1999 and continues to current day. Currently, there is better understanding that prescription opioids can be highly addictive.

Two subsequent waves of opioid-related deaths were then identified. Heroin is an illegal and highly addictive opioid drug. Eighty percent of people who use heroin first misused a prescription drug, and most people who use heroin also use at least one other recreational drug, including marijuana and/or cocaine. Between 2010 and 2016, the rate of heroin overdose deaths increased by 5 fold. Second, the introduction of powerful synthetic opioids, predominantly illicitly manufactured fentanyl, led to a sharp increase in deaths starting in 2013 as depicted on the graph below. Heroin and illicitly manufactured fentanyl are often mixed with or "cut" with other substances. Thus, a user is never aware of the actual amount of heroin or fentanyl in the product that they are ingesting or injecting, which increases the risk of an unintended consequence like overdose and death.

Between 1999 and 2016, over 350,000 Americans died from an opioid overdose, where the number of deaths in 2016 was five times higher than in 1999. In 2018, it is estimated that approximately 115 Americans die every day as a result of opioid overdose.

3 Waves of the Rise in Opioid Overdose Deaths



The Burden of Opioid Misuse

Opioid overdose deaths are only a part of the picture. Opioid misuse and addiction is multifaceted affecting every aspect of a person's life: physical, emotional and social. It is estimated that over 2 million Americans have an opioid use disorder. Addiction is a dependence on alcohol and drugs with continued use and often risk taking behaviors despite negative consequences. It is a serious national health crisis. It occurs across all regions of the country and irrespective of socioeconomic status, sex, gender, race/ethnicity or social groups. Addiction can worsen over time adversely affecting not only the individual but his/her family, social supports, and livelihood as well. Drug and alcohol dependence disorders are medical conditions, not moral failings as once thought, and they can be effectively treated.

Using drugs, especially over longer periods of time and at younger ages, will actually cause changes in the brain, and these changes remain evident long after the individual has stopped using the substance. Substance use disorders are thought to be partially genetic in nature, in that there is a predisposition towards someone developing a dependence on a substance. However, an individual's environment, psychological traits, and stress level also play major roles.

The increase in opioid-related injection drug use has also led to increases in diseases including Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C, and HIV as well as bacterial infections that could be deadly. Consequences of opioid misuse during pregnancy include having a baby who is born suffering from withdrawal, known as neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS). These health-related consequences are just one other reason to seek treatment for a substance use disorder.

The economic burden of prescription opioid misuse in the United States is approximately \$78.5 billion a year, including the costs of healthcare, lost productivity, addiction treatment, and criminal justice involvement. The economic burden of heroin in 2015 was estimated to exceed \$50,000 per heroin user (estimated 51 billion total cost). These annual economic costs highlight the need for sustained healthcare support via recovery and treatment services for individuals with any type of addiction.

The Impact in RVA

Opioids are the most common class of drug involved in RVA overdose deaths. In Virginia in 2017, there were 938 heroin or fentanyl related overdose deaths and 507 prescription opioid related overdose deaths. This is an ongoing problem and one that is negatively impacting lives: our families, communities and the entire state. It's also a problem that we can do something about. It is up to all of us to be part of the solution and help prevent and treat the issue of opioid addiction.

RVA Solutions as a Resource

This site seeks to empower our community and individuals to respond to substance use disorders, including opioid-related misuse, through providing resources in the local Richmond metro area which includes the counties of Chesterfield, Hanover, and Henrico.

All data presented in this section was sourced from the following government websites:

<https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/epidemic/index.html>

<https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/opioids/heroin.html>

<https://www.drugabuse.gov/drugs-abuse/opioids/opioid-overdose-crisis>

https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2018-06/drug_of_abuse.pdf

<https://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content//PHD1112/PHD1112.pdf>

https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/report_1943/ShortReport-1943.html

<https://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content//SMA14-4126/SMA14-4126.pdf>

<http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/data/opioid-overdose/>