



## Opioids

Opioids Home

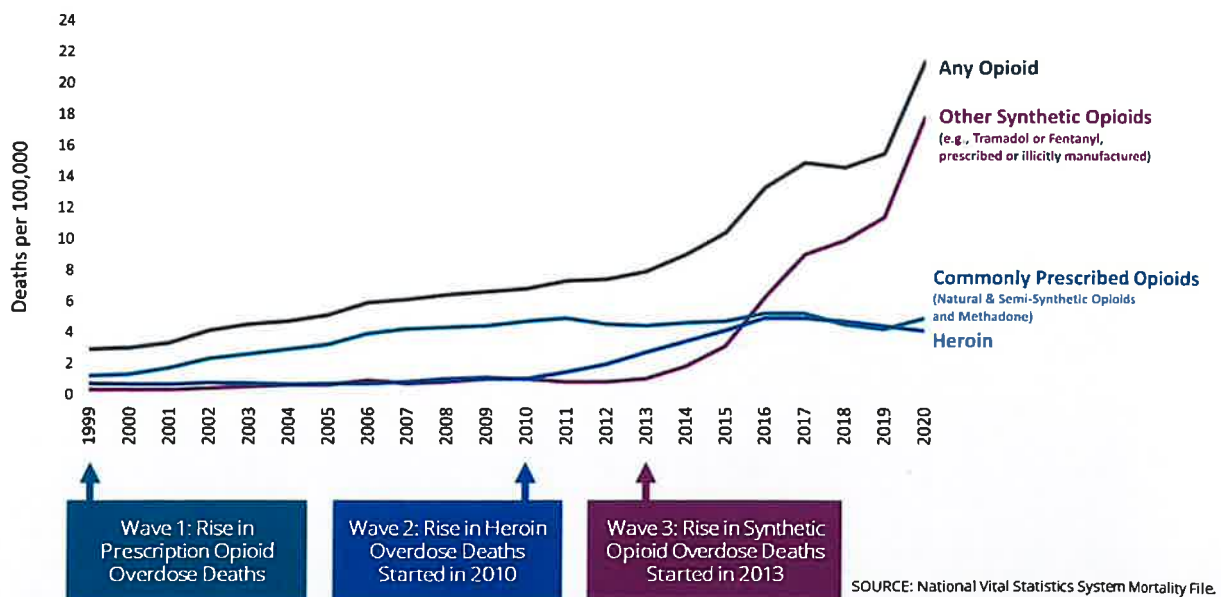
# Understanding the Opioid Overdose Epidemic

The number of drug overdose deaths increased by nearly 30% from 2019 to 2020 and has quintupled since 1999. Nearly 75% of the 91,799 drug overdose deaths in 2020 involved an opioid. From 2019 to 2020, there were significant changes in opioid-involved death rates:

- Opioid-involved death rates increased by 38%.
- Prescription opioid-involved death rates increased by 17%.
- Heroin-involved death rates decreased by 7%.
- Synthetic opioid-involved death rates (excluding methadone) increased by 56%<sup>1</sup>.

## Three Waves of Opioid Overdose Deaths

### Three Waves of Opioid Overdose Deaths



From 1999–2020, more than 564,000 people died from an overdose involving any opioid, including prescription and illicit opioids<sup>1</sup>.

This rise in opioid overdose deaths can be outlined in three distinct waves.

1. The first wave began with increased prescribing of opioids in the 1990s, with overdose deaths involving prescription opioids (natural and semi-synthetic opioids and methadone) increasing since at least 1999<sup>3</sup>.
2. The second wave began in 2010, with rapid increases in overdose deaths involving heroin<sup>4</sup>.
3. The third wave began in 2013, with significant increases in overdose deaths involving synthetic opioids, particularly those involving illicitly manufactured fentanyl<sup>5,6,7</sup>. The market for illicitly manufactured fentanyl continues to change, and it can be found in combination with heroin, counterfeit pills, and cocaine.<sup>8</sup>

Many opioid-involved overdose deaths also include [other drugs](#)<sup>9,10</sup>.

## Combating the Opioid Overdose Epidemic

CDC is committed to fighting the opioid overdose epidemic and [supporting states](#) and communities as they continue work to identify outbreaks, collect data, respond to overdoses, and provide care to those in their communities. [Overdose Data to Action \(OD2A\)](#) is a 4-year cooperative agreement through which CDC funds health departments in 47 states, Washington DC, two territories, and 16 cities and counties for surveillance and prevention efforts. These efforts include timelier tracking of nonfatal and fatal drug overdoses, improving toxicology to better track polysubstance-involved deaths, enhancing linkage to care for people with opioid use disorder and risk for opioid overdose, improving prescription drug monitoring programs, implementing health systems interventions, partnering with public safety, and implementing other innovative surveillance and prevention activities.



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**187**  
PEOPLE

die every day from  
an opioid overdose  
(including Rx and illicit opioids).

CDC's work focuses on:

- **Monitoring trends** to better understand and respond to the epidemic.
- **Advancing research** by collecting and analyzing data on opioid-related overdoses and improving data quality to better identify areas that need assistance and to evaluate prevention efforts.
- **Building state, local and tribal capacity** by equipping states with resources, improving data collection, and supporting use of evidence-based strategies. Overdose Data to Action (OD2A) is a cooperative agreement that aims to increase the timeliness and comprehensives of data and to use those data to inform public health response and prevention activities.
- **Supporting providers, healthcare systems, and payers** with data, tools, and guidance for evidence-based decision-making to improve opioid prescribing and patient safety.
- **Partnering with public safety officials and community organizations**, including law enforcement, to address the growing illicit opioid problem.
- **Increasing public awareness** about prescription opioid misuse and overdose and to make safe choices about opioids.

Collaboration is essential for success in preventing opioid overdose deaths. Medical personnel, emergency departments, first responders, public safety officials, mental health and substance use treatment providers, community-based organizations, public health, and members of the community all bring awareness, resources, and expertise to address this complex and fast-moving epidemic. Together, we can better coordinate efforts to prevent opioid overdoses and deaths.

Read more about [CDC's role in the opioid overdose epidemic](#).

### Related Pages

[NCHS Data Brief: Drug Overdose Deaths in the United States, 1999–2020](#)  [PDF]

[Trends and Geographic Patterns in Drug and Synthetic Opioid Overdose Deaths 2013–2019 — United States \(MMWR\)](#)




[Data Overview](#)

### Additional Resources

[HHS.gov: About the Opioid Epidemic](#) 

[SAMHSA's Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator](#) 

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