

TOOLKIT

Conversation Guides



TEXAS
Health and Human
Services

Texas Targeted Opioid Response

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GUIDE 01

Talking to Your Child About Prescription Opioids and Fentanyl: Preventive Discussions

Many parents and guardians may not believe their child is at risk for misusing opioids or think they don't need to talk about the dangers of fentanyl. However, even young teenagers will have likely heard about opioid misuse and accidental fentanyl overdose (also referred to as poisoning) at some point.

That's because Texas is experiencing an opioid crisis. One in four Texans has experienced an opioid overdose or knows someone who has, according to surveys funded by the Texas Health and Human Services Commission in 2020 and 2021. Fentanyl, specifically, is a powerful opioid up to 50 times stronger than heroin. Illegally manufactured fentanyl is being added to counterfeit (fake) pills that look just like real prescription medications. It's also being mixed with other illegal substances. Fentanyl is nearly impossible to detect on your own because you can't see, taste or smell it. Even one pill can cause a fatal overdose.

It may feel hard to start the conversation, but discussing the dangers of opioids can protect your child from an accidental overdose.

Conversation Guide	Suggested Phrases
<p>Choose the right setting. Keep an eye out for a time when the topic comes up naturally so that the conversation can form naturally, too. For example, if there's a recent news story about a celebrity's opioid use or overdose, or if the problem comes up in the child's school or neighborhood, this could provide the opening for a discussion. Informal times to have conversations, such as in the car or while folding laundry, can help to create a less intimidating environment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I saw that [name] did an interview about going through treatment. I know how much you love their [music / movies / sports]! I didn't know they had been struggling with [prescription / non-prescription drugs]. Have you watched it yet?"
<p>Make it interactive. Asking your child if they have heard about opioids or what they already know can be a good starting point and gives you an opportunity to do some research together.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "What have you heard about opioids? [Listen, validate accurate information and correct any misinformation.] Maybe you've heard of brand names of opioids like Vicodin, Ultram, OxyContin, Percocet or Codeine. These prescription pain medications are safe when you take them as a doctor prescribes, but they're also addictive. If someone takes them without a prescription — for example, they got pills from a friend or family member — or takes more than their doctor told them to, that person can overdose really easily." • "What have you heard about fentanyl? [Listen, validate accurate information and correct any misinformation.] Fentanyl is a powerful opioid up to 50 times stronger than heroin. It's safe when taken as prescribed by a doctor to treat severe pain. However, illegally made fentanyl is being added to different substances, including fake pills that look exactly like the real thing. For example, if someone takes a pill from their friend at a party, it might contain fentanyl — even if it looks exactly like pills that come from a pharmacy. The scary thing is that many people don't know that they're taking fentanyl — and even one pill can cause a fatal overdose."
<p>Help your child think through what they would do. Talk to your child about having an "exit plan" if they are offered prescription drugs that are not theirs. Make sure they know that if the pills weren't prescribed to them or didn't come from a pharmacy, they're not safe. Peer pressure can be hard to resist, and having a plan to avoid misuse can help them make smart choices on their own. Be sure to practice the exit plan in a comfortable environment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "What if someone you were friends with told you that you'd feel better if you tried their mom's medication? That they've tried it, and it helps them feel less stressed? It could be helpful to have an idea of some things you could say so that making the smart choice at the moment is also the easy choice." • "What if your friend offered you a pill to help you stay up late to study for an exam? Let's practice some different ways you can say, 'No thanks.'"

Conversation Guide	Suggested Phrases
<p>Make sure they know about lifesaving naloxone. Naloxone is a safe, legal medication that reverses the effects of an opioid overdose, including fentanyl, heroin and prescription opioids. If someone's breathing has slowed or stopped because of an opioid overdose, naloxone will quickly restore normal breathing.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Have you heard about naloxone? It's a medication that can save someone's life in minutes, and it's really easy to use. Naloxone won't hurt someone who does not have opioids in their system, so it's always best to use it if you think someone may be experiencing an overdose."
<p>Talk often. These conversations are not a one-time thing, so plan to have many short talks, even as your child gets older. Talking often sets a tone that this will be an ongoing dialogue, and it can make it easier to get over the awkwardness or recover from a weird conversation. Add new information when it's relevant, revisit your expectations often, and let them know you are always there for them.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Remember when we were talking about opioids [or fentanyl] a while ago? I learned something new that I want to share with you."

CITATIONS:

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GUIDE 02

Talking to Your Child About Prescription Opioids and Fentanyl: If You Discover Your Child is Misusing

From prescription medication misuse to counterfeit pills that contain fentanyl, opioids are taking the lives of young Texans at an alarming rate. One in four Texans has experienced an opioid overdose (also referred to as a poisoning) or knows someone who has, according to surveys funded by the Texas Health and Human Services Commission in 2020 and 2021. Fentanyl, specifically, is a powerful opioid up to 50 times stronger than heroin. Illegally manufactured fentanyl is being added to counterfeit (fake) pills that look just like real prescription medications. It's also being mixed with other illegal substances. Fentanyl is nearly impossible to detect on your own because you can't see, taste or smell it. Even one pill can cause a fatal overdose.

It may feel hard to start the conversation with your child, but discussing the dangers of opioids could save their life.

Think about your goals for the conversation before talking to your child. Be sure your child is not under the influence of opioids and ask if the two of you can talk about something important. Turn off phones and step away from other distractions. Don't worry about saying everything perfectly; lifesaving conversations start with a few words.

Conversation Guide	Suggested Phrases
<p>Invite your child to have a conversation. Let them know ahead of time that you want to talk, because it will reinforce their autonomy and commitment to return to the conversation later. It also avoids blindsiding them with a difficult or uncomfortable conversation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I’d like to talk about something important. Is now a good time? If not, when can we chat today?”
<p>Be specific. First, confirm that they really are misusing by asking some broad questions and staying curious. See what comes up before focusing exclusively on opioids. Then, explain what you observed that made you concerned without making accusations or overreacting to something that has already happened.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “What’s been going on? How have you been handling things?” • “It seems like your grades have been slipping and you’ve been missing work. I’ve noticed you aren’t yourself when you take opioids and I’m worried about you.”
<p>Try not to take things personally. Be prepared for strong reactions or for your child to be evasive or unwilling to engage. Try to stay as calm as possible throughout the conversation. People will try to get out of uncomfortable situations and may lie or deflect blame. Be ready for that and have some strategies for responding that aren’t retaliatory but are firm.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Okay, it seems like you’re not ready to talk about this right now. Let’s try again after baseball practice.” • “This conversation might be tough, but let’s just do our best.”
<p>Create a dialogue. Ask open-ended questions that elicit more than just a “yes” or “no,” and listen as much as you talk. Be sure it’s a two-way exchange, rather than a lecture, and let your child know you value their honesty.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “When did you first try them?” • “I see. I didn’t know that, so thank you for telling me.” • “How did your friends react when you told them?”
<p>Offer empathy and compassion. At times, your child could be hiding their true feelings out of fear, embarrassment or shame. Show that you are willing to listen without judgment. Putting a hand on your child’s shoulder or giving a hug when it feels right can be an important way of showing understanding.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I’m so sorry you’re struggling with this. I have some ideas about what we might want to do next, but I’d also like to know what you think might help.”

Conversation Guide	Suggested Phrases
<p>Remind them that they are supported. Express how much you care about them and explain that the reason you're asking them about this is because you want them to be happy, safe and healthy. Remind them that they can count on you for support and confide in you whenever they need to.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "As your parent, I will always love you and I just want to see you happy and thriving. I know we can figure this out together. I'll always be here when you're struggling with this or don't know what to do."
<p>Carry lifesaving naloxone. Naloxone is a safe, legal medication that reverses the effects of an opioid overdose, including fentanyl, heroin and prescription opioids. If someone's breathing has slowed or stopped because of an opioid overdose, naloxone will quickly restore normal breathing.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "One of the risks of misusing opioids is they could cause your breathing to slow or stop. Naloxone is a lifesaver, like having a fire extinguisher. Hopefully you won't need it, but it's important to have it on hand in case you do. Let's go together to buy some, so we'll always have it if we witness an overdose and need it."
<p>Get help from the experts. You may wish to enlist additional help by contacting the school counselor, school nurse or family doctor about your concerns.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I'd like to talk about something important. Is now a good time? If not, when can we chat today?"

CITATIONS:

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GUIDE 03

Youth and Young Adults: Talking with Friends About Prescription Opioids and Fentanyl

It's important to talk with your friends about the dangers of opioid misuse, including fentanyl — even if you're not concerned about a friend at the moment. That's because Texas is experiencing an opioid crisis — and it's taking the lives of teens and young adults just like you and your friends.

One in four Texans has experienced an opioid overdose (also referred to as a poisoning) or knows someone who has, according to surveys funded by the Texas Health and Human Services Commission in 2020 and 2021. Fentanyl, specifically, is a powerful opioid up to 50 times stronger than heroin. Illegally manufactured fentanyl is being added to counterfeit (fake) pills that look just like real prescription medications. It's also being mixed with other illegal substances. Fentanyl is nearly impossible to detect on your own because you can't see, taste or smell it. Even one pill can cause a fatal overdose.

It may feel awkward to start a conversation like this, but once you and your friend are talking, it'll be easier to start again the next time. If you learn your friend is struggling with substance use, let them share their experience and try to understand their perspective. Don't offer advice or try to solve your friend's problem if they have one. Instead, just be there to hear them out.

After you speak with them, talk with an adult you trust about what your friend is going through. This is especially important if your friend is struggling with prescription or non-prescription drugs, because they can be particularly dangerous and even deadly.

Conversation Guide	Suggested Phrases
<p>Choose the right time. A great way to start the conversation is to do it casually. For example, you could use a news story or recent event as a chance to spark the conversation. Keep it light—it doesn't have to be a therapy session or an emotionally loaded topic. It can just be part of a conversation you'd have with them at any time.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Did you see that a student at [neighboring high school] went to the hospital for an overdose? Kind of scary. I'm glad they're okay now. Hopefully, this helps everyone realize how risky opioids are.”
<p>Be there for them. It's always good to remind your friends that you are there for them and can make time to talk if they need it. They might not take you up on it often or right away, but when they do, give them your undivided attention. Take time to remove distractions and make the conversation the most important thing happening.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Hey, if you're having a hard time, you know you can talk to me. I'd rather hear about it than you go through it alone. I've got your back.” • “Yeah, of course I can talk. I get out of work at 8:00 tonight; can we meet afterward?”
<p>Understand the situation. It can be easy to jump to conclusions about something a friend says they are struggling with. Take a pause before responding to think about how you can react with focus and compassion. Ask questions so that you understand exactly what the stress or dilemma is. Are they struggling with opioid use specifically, or are they struggling with something else and occasionally turning to substances? Knowing that can determine whether they're more in need of prevention or treatment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I'm really sorry you're dealing with this, and I'm so glad you told me. I want to help however I can. What part is the hardest right now? How have you been handling things?” • “What substances are you having issues with? What happened after you tried it? When/why did you end up using it again? What happens when you try not to use it?” • “I care about you and want to see you get better. I'm going to talk to [trusted adult] so they can help us.”
<p>Offer empathy and compassion. Maybe there's a question you could ask them: about their experience, their feelings or their support network. How you listen and respond to your friend goes a long way in establishing trust and helping them feel comfortable with opening up to you again in the future.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I know everything will be okay, but how are you feeling about it right now? Have you talked about it with anyone else?” • “I know you can get through it, and I'll be there if you need another person to lean on.”
<p>Carry lifesaving naloxone. Naloxone is a safe, legal medication that reverses the effects of an opioid overdose, including fentanyl, heroin and prescription opioids. If someone's breathing has slowed or stopped because of an opioid overdose, naloxone will quickly restore normal breathing.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “One of the risks of misusing opioids is they could cause your breathing to slow or stop. Naloxone is a lifesaver, like having a fire extinguisher. Hopefully you won't need it, but it's important to have it on hand in case you do. Let's go together to buy some, so we'll always have it if we witness an overdose and need it.”

CITATIONS:

getthefactsrx.com/conversation-starters

GUIDE 04

Talking to Adults and Seniors About Prescription Opioids

Opioid addiction is a disease that can happen to anyone at any age. Many older adults who struggle with prescription opioid misuse do so by accident. Older adults are more likely to suffer from chronic pain and physical illnesses that make them more susceptible to opioid use disorder. They metabolize medications differently than someone young, and many older adults take multiple daily medications, increasing the risk for mistakes, misuse or drug-drug interaction.

No matter their age, talking with your loved one about opioid misuse can make all the difference. Don't worry about saying everything perfectly; lifesaving conversations start with a few words.

Conversation Guide	Suggested Phrases
<p>Choose the right time. Be sure the two of you can have more than a few minutes alone. Don't bring up the subject when the person is under the influence of alcohol or drugs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I'd like to talk about something important. Is now a good time? If not, when can we chat today?"
<p>Be specific. List the behaviors you've observed, and state that you are worried about the effect that opioid misuse is having in their lives. It can also help to talk about another person's hiccups as a conversation starter. By talking about someone else, you can talk about your loved one's behavior without them feeling attacked.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "You seem a lot more tired lately, and I'm surprised you missed coffee with the girls. I'm starting to worry about you." • "Sarah's dad told her he's having a harder time keeping his meds organized now that his doctor changed one of his prescriptions. Has that ever been troublesome for you?"
<p>Remind them that you support them. Emphasize that you care for your family member or friend, and want to have this conversation because you are concerned about continued use.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I care about you and want you to be around as long as possible. I'm afraid that if we don't figure this out together, it will keep getting worse."
<p>Offer empathy and compassion. Create a two-way dialogue where you can both talk about your concerns and understand the person's perspective. Using open-ended questions can help prevent them from feeling lectured or judged. Chronic pain can be a very real concern for older adults, so discussing what other choices they've tried can help you identify ways to manage the situation together.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "What were some things that helped the pain before you got the prescription? When you asked your doctor about it, what was their advice? There might be some alternatives, or we could weigh the treatment options together with your doctor." • "You don't have to go through this alone, and I'll be here when you're ready."
<p>Keep trying. Don't expect a major change to take place right away. This conversation could be the first time the person has thought about this problem. If the person states they are certain there is not a problem, ask to talk again at some point in the future.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I know it's probably hard to talk about this. Let's take some time to process and maybe we can talk again later this week?"

CITATIONS:

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