

# What is an overdose?

Dear Denise:

I read all the time about people suffering from overdoses, multiple overdoses. I thought if you overdose you die. Please explain.

Sincerely,  
Janice

Dear Janice:

A few years ago when I was still producing my weekly radio show I asked the same question. I thought that overdose meant you died too. So, I brought an expert on my show and interviewed him to find out what I was confused about. It was kind of a complicated question then but as time has progressed is even more complicated and controversial now.

The short answer is this. When a person overdoses from drugs, and what happens can depend on the type of substance overdosed on, many things can happen. Organs can shut down, cardiac arrest can occur, the respiratory system can slow to almost stopping, kidneys can fail, etc. This doesn't necessarily mean you will die. It means your body is in major distress and you need emergency help. Depending on the level of distress and the help available, one can be saved. Some people do die.

As I mentioned, nowadays it is more controversial than it used to be. It used to be treated as any of these issues would be. Over the years a drug has been developed and used in emergency rooms called Narcan, which can instantly reverse an opioid overdose. It can often bring a person back to a relatively normal state quickly. First responders now carry this drug and can use it on overdose victims. Recently it has become available for anyone to buy and use. Statistically, here in Surry County, just over the past year many lives have been saved by the more regular use of this drug. There are still many overdoses yet a reduced number of deaths from overdoses.

Here is where the controversy lies. There is a very big stigma still around those who use and abuse illegal substances, prescription drugs included. It is very common to believe that these people are bad people, make bad decisions and must suffer the consequences, and that these kind of people are not related to us, we would not have these kind of people in our lives. Helping people to reverse overdose is the controversy here. Some of those able to give the Narcan believe that there should be a limited amount of times we should try to keep these people alive. Some don't like the idea of keeping them alive at all. There are those people uncomfortable with allocating government money to pay for this life saving drug to keep people with substance abuse and use disorders alive.

I understand the controversy. I don't usually express my thoughts on these topics since I do understand both sides. But, I will admit, after working in the field of addiction for many years and meeting so many families and loved ones who suffer from addiction, I have developed a simple attitude. If someone is alive they have a chance to one day make a good decision and turn around their life and become a contributing member of society. If they are dead there is no chance for this. Sometimes it takes multiple chances.

I have been out in the community talking to lots of people in Surry County in all walks of life and have come across both ways of thinking. Some think that these people who suffer from substance abuse disorder choose this life and should suffer the consequences even if it means

death. Others, like me, have hope that things will change in a person's life and they decide to move on a more positive path.

What do you think? I would love to hear from everyone who has an opinion to understand the pulse of Surry County on this issue. Think about it, please.

Regards,

Denise Krochta

Office of Surry County Opioid Response