



ABSOLUTE SCOOP

DID YOU KNOW?

Ohio provides free naloxone to organizations, including long-term care facilities.

Facilities may maintain this over-the-counter nasal spray as emergency house stock for use when needed.



NALOXONE IN LONG-TERM CARE

Written by Eric McCaw, RPh, BCGP, Consultant Pharmacist

Opioids play an essential role in pain management and end-of-life care for many long-term care residents. While these medications are often beneficial, they can cause the potentially fatal side effect of opioid-induced respiratory depression (OIRD). Every long-term care facility should be prepared to recognize and respond to this emergency. When used correctly, naloxone is a lifesaving tool in this response. Fortunately, the State of Ohio allows organizations, including long-term care facilities, to obtain naloxone at no cost for emergency use.[1]

According to the CDC, over 50,000 drug overdose deaths involving an opioid occurred in the United States in 2024.[2] Although most fatal overdoses happen outside long-term care settings, OIRD can also occur in residents receiving appropriately prescribed opioids.

The CDC recommends elevated caution with residents receiving opioids who also have one or more of the following risk factors:[3]

- Age 65 or older
- Reduced renal or hepatic function
- Higher opioid dosages
- Concurrent benzodiazepine therapy
- Sleep-disordered breathing
- History of opioid overdose or substance use disorder

These higher-risk residents should be monitored closely for signs of OIRD.

Recognizing and Responding to an Opioid Emergency

Common signs of opioid-induced respiratory depression include:

- Unresponsiveness or difficulty awakening
- Slow, shallow, or absent respirations
- Pinpoint pupils
- Cyanosis of the lips or nail beds
- Decreased oxygen saturation

If OIRD is suspected, staff should activate EMS according to facility policy, administer naloxone, and provide appropriate breathing support. The resident should be monitored and supported until emergency responders arrive.

Naloxone is an opioid antagonist that quickly blocks the effects of opioids and reverses OIRD. Improvement is often seen within minutes, although additional doses may be needed. Because naloxone has a shorter duration of action than many opioids, respiratory depression may return after the initial improvement. Emergency medical evaluation is still necessary even if the resident appears to recover.[4]



Naloxone Formulations

Intranasal spray

Narcan® and equivalent naloxone nasal sprays are supplied as ready-to-use, single-dose devices.

- Insert the nozzle into one nostril and press the plunger firmly to administer the dose
- If there is no response or symptoms return, administer another dose every two to three minutes using a new device. Alternate nostrils with each dose and continue until the resident responds or emergency assistance arrives[5]

Injection

Naloxone injection is available in vials and may be administered intramuscularly into the deltoid, thigh, or another large muscle. It may alternatively be administered subcutaneously. Injectable naloxone requires the necessary administration supplies and appropriately trained staff.

Ohio's Free Naloxone Program

The State of Ohio provides naloxone at no cost to organizations, including long-term care facilities. The product currently supplied is an over-the-counter naloxone nasal spray. Facilities may maintain this supply as house stock for emergency use rather than as a patient-specific supply. Availability is contingent upon program funding, and products obtained through the program may not be resold.[1,6]

Facilities may request a free supply of naloxone by visiting naloxone.ohio.gov.

If resident-specific naloxone is needed, Absolute Pharmacy can supply it through the normal medication-ordering and delivery process.

Staff should know where the naloxone is stored, how it should be administered, and what steps to take following its use. Facility policies should also address staff training, contacting EMS, monitoring, documentation, and replacing used or expired supplies.

References

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4. FDA. Discuss Naloxone When Prescribing Opioids. Available at: <https://www.fda.gov/drugs/drug-safety-communications/fda-recommends-health-care-professionals-discuss-naloxone-all-patients-when-prescribing-opioid-pain>
5. FDA. Naloxone Hydrochloride Nasal Spray Prescribing Information. Available at: https://www.accessdata.fda.gov/drugsatfda_docs/label/2023/208969s000b1.pdf
6. FDA. FDA Approves First Over-the-Counter Naloxone Nasal Spray. Available at: <https://www.fda.gov/news-events/press-announcements/fda-approves-first-over-counter-naloxone-nasal-spray>

About the Author



Outside of work, Eric loves to spend time outdoors including hiking, running, backpacking, gardening, and photography. He enjoys traveling with his wife and 2 children.

Eric McCaw, RPh, BCGP is a Consultant Pharmacist. Eric graduated from The Ohio State University. He began working at Absolute Pharmacy as an in-house Operations Pharmacist in 2006. In 2010, he transitioned to consulting and has enjoyed working with many facility staff members throughout Ohio while striving to improve the lives of residents.

Why does ice cream get invited to every party?

Because it's cool!



What did the Buffalo say to his son when he left for college?

Bison!