



## **History and Progress of the Opioid Epidemic**

The opioid epidemic in America began more than twenty years ago when doctors started prescribing opioid painkiller drugs that led patients to become addicted. The well-intentioned efforts of doctors to control pain, combined with the aggressive marketing tactics of pharmaceutical companies, created a confluence of events that helped the opioid crisis to take root.

When people could no longer get prescription opiates, many of them turned to heroin, (people with a history of using prescription opioids are 13 times more likely to start using heroin than those with no history of prescription opioid misuse) and the increase in use of this dangerous street drug sped up the growth and progress of the epidemic. Between 2010 and 2016, there was a fivefold increase in heroin overdose deaths in America.

As overall opiate use increased, a new synthetic opiate drug, fentanyl, came on the market in 2013, and for the past decade hundreds of thousands of Americans have lost their lives to fentanyl overdose.

In the beginning, fentanyl was only used to cut heroin but now, because it is so powerful and

profitable, it is mixed with other drugs like cocaine, methamphetamine and (according to some news reports) even marijuana products. This has put an increased number of drug users at risk of dying from an opioid overdose and greatly added to the sum of opioid deaths nationwide. According to the CDC, fentanyl-related deaths increased by 88% per year over a five-year period.

## **COVID, Teens, and Poverty**

The stress and isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in more people seeking prescription drugs on the black market, and according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), there has been an eightfold increase in the number of illicit prescription medicines that contain fentanyl since the pandemic began. Occasional users who buy sleeping pills or prescription weight-loss drugs on the black market are not aware they might contain fentanyl and are ending up overdosing.

Teenagers who buy Rx drugs on the street and mix them with alcohol at parties are overdosing from fentanyl contained in the illicit pills. This has added to the number of young people who have fallen victim to the seemingly never-ending opioid epidemic. The recent rise in adolescent overdose deaths has shocked the medical community and substance abuse prevention and treatment professionals.

In 2015 something happened in America that had not occurred in the past one hundred years: life expectancy began to decline. This shortened life expectancy in our country was directly related to the increase in drug overdose deaths and suicides due to the use of opioid drugs.

Adding to the problem currently is increased inflation nationwide and the economic decline being experienced by many communities due to de-industrialization. These issues cause poverty, and concentrated poverty results in suicides and opioid overdose deaths that have come to be known as "deaths of despair."

### **Summary and Conclusion**

The opioid epidemic has continued to evolve and become more deadly over time. It began with prescription opioids, progressed to increased heroin use, and then to synthetic opioids like fentanyl. All of these drugs remain popular and each one has created its own epidemic. Many addicts are using all three of these forms of opioid drugs at various times, and in reality, America is experiencing three drug epidemics at once.

Over the past six decades, America has gone through one drug epidemic after another, and our country is currently suffering from the most prolonged and deadly drug epidemic yet.

As a society, we must re-evaluate our efforts to end, and prevent drug epidemics in the U.S.

We have to determine why Americans are so vulnerable to substance abuse and begin to address the underlying issues. We must focus more on drug use prevention beginning at an early age. If we can prevent drug use early in life, we have a much better chance of helping to keep individuals drug free throughout their lifespan.

We also must encourage more employers to implement drug free workplace programs that provide much-needed drug prevention, drug education, and drug treatment for employees.

Making substance abuse treatment more readily available is also critically important in dealing with drug epidemics. The advent of telehealth is one positive outcome of COVID. Being able to get medication like methadone and buprenorphine through a phone call, along with access to treatment protocols that include coaching and group therapy, is vital in providing support for individuals with substance use disorders.

Implementing drug use prevention strategies and providing treatment, healthcare, social protection, and rehabilitation services is the solution to America's drug epidemics.