

SA Palliative Care Community Pharmacy Update

A joint initiative of South Australian Palliative Care Services

Naloxone is used to treat accidental overdose, available at no cost, without a prescription in the Take Home Naloxone (THN) Program (participating pharmacies).

Background

Opioids safely manage pain in palliative care in most cases. However the risk of accidental overdose may result from inappropriate dose(s)/dose escalation and in rare occasions of intentional misuse.

Stopping the opioid and phoning 000 are the immediate management steps of suspected opioid overdose.

Symptoms of opioid overdose

- > Unresponsive or difficult to rouse or unarousable with voice and light shake
- > Awake, but unable to talk
- > Possibly vomiting
- > Making choking sounds, or a snore-like gurgling noise
- > Some people may have reduced respiratory rate
- > May go limp and floppy
- > Blue lips and nails

Sedation is a less helpful indicator in patients with an underlying high level of sedation.

It is unlikely they will be able to administer naloxone themselves.

When to consider THN

- > Opioids at a dosage of ≥ 50 mg/day oral morphine or equivalent dose
- > Have respiratory conditions or obstructive sleep apnoea (regardless of opioid dose)
- > Are taking benzodiazepines (regardless of opioid dose)
- > Have current or history of Opioid Use Disorder, non-opioid substance use disorder, report excessive alcohol use, or have a mental health disorder (regardless of opioid dose).

THN considerations in palliative care

- > Routine THN is not recommended in all palliative patients, assessment of [Goals of Care](#) and individual risk is necessary
- > Care must be taken to avoid inappropriate naloxone. It is important that the signs of dying/advanced progressive disease are not confused with those of opioid overdose
- > Naloxone given in large doses can cause acute opioid withdrawal (ranging from mild anxiety, muscle aches to life-threatening tachycardia and hypertension) and pain crisis which is difficult to manage
- > In a hospice setting small naloxone doses would be titrated slowly to gently reverse opioid effects. This is not possible with THN pre-filled large doses

Available Naloxone Formulas

- > Intranasal spray (Nyxoid® 1.8mg)
- > Preloaded syringe (Prenoxad® 400mcg)

General advice about how to speak to patients about naloxone, how to use specific formulas, THN program and client handouts can be found on:

- > [SA Health](#)

For more information

Contact the Advanced Practice Pharmacists:

- > **Michaela del Campo, Central**
Michaela.delcampo@sa.gov.au / 8222 6825
- > **Brianna Kinnear, Southern**
Brianna.kinnear@sa.gov.au / 8275 1732
- > **Safwat Gergis, Northern**
safwat.gergis@sa.gov.au / 8161 2499

©Department of Health, Government of South Australia. All rights reserved.

This update is intended to provide practical up to date and factual information relating to pharmacy and medicines management in the setting of Palliative Care and is based on critical review of available evidence. Individual patient circumstances must be considered when applying this information. Please feel free to distribute this update further to interested colleagues.