

First Aid for a Drug Overdose

Remember, when someone overdoses their body is responding just like it would to any other poison. Poisonous consumer products (such as inhalants) have poison symbols on their labels, but there are many other substances that don't carry warnings. Examples include alcohol, illicit drugs and medications when not taken as prescribed. Many drugs that are not harmful in small amounts are poisonous in large amounts.

Types of drug overdoses

The three types of drug overdoses are classified according to how they enter the body:

- **swallowed** drugs – through the mouth
- **inhaled** drugs – through the lungs
- **injected** drugs – through the skin using a hollow needle

An important part of the first aid for drug overdoses is telephoning the Poison Information Centre for advice on what to do. Before calling, the first aider must quickly gather as much information about the incident as possible. Use the history of the scene and the signs and symptoms of the casualty to gather the information you'll need to answer the questions asked by the Poison Information Centre.

History of the scene

When drug overdosing occurs, act quickly but do not panic. You need to know four basic facts to give appropriate first aid for a drug overdose:

- what drug was taken – container labels may identify the drug; otherwise, save vomit and give it to medical help for analysis.
- how much drug was taken – estimate the quantity that may have been taken based on what you see or are told – the number of pills originally in the container, the amount of drug in the bottle, etc. Estimate the size/age of the casualty.
- how the drug entered the body – first aid may differ for drugs taken by the mouth, injected into the blood or breathed into the lungs.
- when the drug was taken – the length of time the drug has been in the body will help determine the first aid and medical care needed.



Signs and symptoms of a drug overdose

If the history does not reveal what drug was taken, or by what means it was taken, signs and symptoms may be helpful in answering these questions. All drugs may affect consciousness, breathing and circulation. Other signs and symptoms may vary depending on how the drug was taken. Drugs that have been:

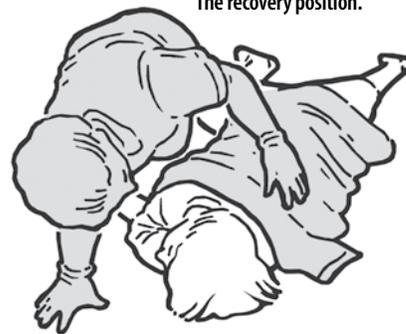
- swallowed usually cause nausea, abdominal cramps, diarrhea and vomiting. They may discolour the lips, cause burns in or around the mouth or leave an odour on the breath.

- injected through the skin usually irritate the point of entry and may cause an allergic or behavioural reaction.
- inhaled may cause problems with breathing. Signs and symptoms may include coughing, chest pain and difficulty breathing. Prolonged lack of oxygen will cause headache, dizziness, unconsciousness, stopped breathing and cardiac arrest.

General first aid for a drug overdose

- 1** Begin Emergency Site Management (ESM) – do a scene survey. Gather any information about the suspected drug. Assess the casualty's responsiveness.
- If the casualty is responsive, call the Poison Information Centre in your region, or your hospital emergency department. Answer any questions and follow their advice on first aid.
- If the casualty is unresponsive, call 911 immediately and go to step 2.
- 2** Do a primary survey. If breathing is stopped begin CPR. Check for poisonous material around the mouth first. Use a barrier device if you have one.
- 3** Place the unconscious breathing casualty into the recovery position.
- 4** Give ongoing casualty care until medical help takes over.

The recovery position.



Poison Information Centre

The phone number for your local Poison Information Centre is listed at the beginning of your telephone directory.

Extracted and revised from "First on the Scene: the Complete Guide to First Aid and CPR", 2000, The Prior of Canada of the Most Venerable order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem.