

## **International Overdose Awareness Day: A Call for Prevention, Compassion, and Change**

Every year on August 31, communities across the globe come together to observe International Overdose Awareness Day (IOAD), a day to remember those lost to overdose, support those who grieve, and advocate for meaningful action. But beyond remembrance, this day is a vital opportunity to focus on prevention through a trauma-informed, poison prevention lens that acknowledges the complexity of substance use and prioritizes education, empathy, and systemic change.

Overdose continues to be one of the leading causes of injury-related death in the United States. The crisis affects people from all walks of life and is driven by multiple factors including trauma, untreated mental health conditions, chronic pain, lack of access to care, and the growing presence of synthetic opioids like fentanyl in the drug supply.

While awareness is important, prevention must remain our top priority and that starts with understanding why people use substances, how they're exposed to risks, and what support is needed to keep people safe.

Substance use is often rooted in adverse life experiences, including abuse, neglect, community violence, and untreated emotional pain. A trauma-informed prevention strategy recognizes that people who use substances are often trying to cope with or escape trauma without seeking harm.

### **Key trauma-informed prevention principles include:**

- **Safety:** Ensuring environments and services are physically and emotionally safe for individuals who may be vulnerable or stigmatized.
- **Trust and transparency:** Building relationships based on honesty and compassion, especially between providers, families, and those who use substances.
- **Empowerment and choice:** Centering the voices and needs of those with lived experience and offering harm reduction strategies and recovery options without judgment.
- **Collaboration:** Encouraging cooperation across sectors; healthcare, education, public safety, and community organizations, to prevent overdoses before they happen.

Overdose is, at its core, a poisoning event. Viewing it through a poison prevention lens allows us to focus on the unintentional exposure to high-risk substances and the tools we can use to reduce harm.

Effective poison prevention strategies for overdose include:

- **Safe storage and disposal of medications:** Keep prescription medications (especially opioids) secure and out of reach of children, teens, and visitors. Dispose of unused medications through take-back programs.
- **Proper labeling and education:** Ensure all medications are clearly labeled and patients understand dosage instructions and potential interactions.
- **Community naloxone access:** Naloxone (Narcan) is a life-saving medication that reverses opioid overdose. Make it widely available and teach community members how to use it.
- **Public education on counterfeit pills and fentanyl contamination:** Many overdoses result from unknown or unintentional ingestion of substances laced with fentanyl. Education campaigns can save lives.

One of the biggest barriers to overdose prevention is stigma. People who use drugs are often labeled, judged, or criminalized instead of being offered help. This drives individuals into isolation and prevents them from seeking medical care or support.

By talking openly about overdose and embracing non-judgmental, trauma-informed prevention, we send a clear message: Every life is worth saving. People deserve support, not shame. Prevention is not just about substances, it's about people, relationships, and systems that can either protect or harm them.

### **How You Can Make a Difference This IOAD**

- Educate yourself and others about overdose risks, signs, and response strategies.
- Carry naloxone and encourage others to do the same.
- Host or attend an IOAD event in your community.
- Support harm reduction organizations working on the front lines.
- Advocate for trauma-informed care in healthcare, schools, and public health systems.
- Remember and honor those lost and listen to the stories of those still here.

International Overdose Awareness Day is a solemn reminder of the lives we've lost but it's also a powerful call to action. With education, compassion, and a prevention-first mindset, we can build communities where fewer people are harmed, and more people are helped.

Let's commit to a future where every person has the knowledge, tools, and support to live a safer, healthier life.