



Health Advisory

March 21, 2017

Warning Regarding Misuse and Abuse of Prescription Opioids

This health advisory is being issued to bring attention to the alarming trend and national epidemic of misuse and abuse of prescription opioids and sedatives. As our communities and families face the devastation of loss associated with addiction and misuse of these prescription medications we call attention to the need for families and health care professionals to be aware of the scope of this epidemic and new guidelines for prescribing.

Nationally, each year, prescription narcotics result in more fatal overdoses than heroin and cocaine combined. Add to this that the second leading cause of fatal overdoses are prescription sedatives — medicines such as Xanax and Ativan — and we are compelled to recognize and address the unintended consequence that may result from the misuse of these medications. A rise in overdoses related to heroin abuse parallels this trend.

Data from the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) reveal that there were 53 accidental drug overdose deaths in 2003 in Contra Costa County. By 2014 the number had more than doubled to 111. Of profound concern is the trend that underlies these occurrences. What we are experiencing in our County is, tragically, mirrored across the nation.

Information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reveals that the death rate from drug overdose has more than doubled since 2000 and on a national level has claimed the lives of more than 500,000 individuals since then. In 2015 there were 52,404 deaths associated with drug overdose in the U.S., more than any previous year on record and nearly 12% higher than in 2014. Underlying these numbers is that fact that some 63% of these deaths are related to opioids, including prescription painkillers. Drug overdose has now replaced automobile accidents as the leading cause of accidental death among individuals aged 25 to 64. cdc.gov/mmwr/pdf/wk/mm6450.pdf

According to the CDC, prescription opioid sales in the United States increased 300% between 1999 and 2010. *CDC Vital Signs MMWR 2011:60(43); 1487-1492*. Between 1999 and 2013, the number of deaths attributed to opioid pain relievers increased by 400%, cdc.gov/nchs/deaths.htm

A Call to Action:

Counties, health systems and community partners across the greater Bay Area are galvanized in their efforts to address this epidemic. Closer to home, the Alameda-Contra Costa Medical Association, together with local public health agencies, health insurers, behavioral health providers, community partners and health care provider organizations, are calling for emergency Departments, urgent care centers and primary care clinicians to adopt a set of guidelines for prescribing opioids. These guidelines are intended to help balance the need for the treatment of pain with the very real risk of drug



dependency, abuse and addiction. Electronic copies of the guidelines and other helpful information can be downloaded from www.EastBaySafeRX.org.

In addition, health systems are expanding the availability of substance use disorder treatment programs and medication-assisted treatment.

In addition, Naloxone, an opioid antagonist, that can reverse life threatening opioid overdoses, can be obtained for family and friends of people taking prescribed and non-prescribed opioids. Pharmacists can provide this drug without a prescription and many insurers cover this medication when prescribed by health providers. It has been shown that Naloxone, when made available for use by trained nonmedical people, can reduce opioid-related deaths.

Prescription drug abuse is a complex social problem that requires new dialogue, innovative solutions and the engagement of our health care community. Launched in May 2015, the East Bay Safe Prescribing Coalition brings together stakeholders across sectors, including physicians, pharmacists, schools, law enforcement agencies, public health officials, behavioral health experts and concerned community members, to design and implement local strategies for prevention and awareness. Efforts by regional healthcare delivery systems and health insurers have shown positive results in reducing the number of prescriptions for opioid-based pain medication. In addition, the Contra Costa MEDS (Medication Education and Disposal Safety) Coalition is a community-based effort that has engaged multiple sectors, communities and partners to advance awareness and develop local strategies to help prevent the misuse of prescription medication. Individuals interested in joining coalition efforts are encouraged to contact Coalition Chair April Rovero at 925-980-5490.

Individuals seeking confidential assistance with drug abuse treatment can contact the Contra Costa Behavioral Health Access Line at 1-800-846-1652, Monday to Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. to speak with a counselor. Providers or members of the public can also contact the California Poison Control Center at 1-800-222-1222. More information can be found at www.samhsa.gov/prescription-drug-miuse-abuse and cdc.gov/drugoverdose/states/state_prevention.html

In addition, the CDPH's [California Opioid Overdose Surveillance Dashboard](#) shows county comparisons of overdose deaths, ED rates and prescribing. Check out the "explore" section – now with bubble plots to dramatically visualize California's wide disparities.

