

## WHAT ARE OPIOIDS?

Opioids are a category of drugs that can cause euphoric effects and lead to dependence. Common opioids include opiates (naturally derived from the flowering opium poppy plant), such as heroin, morphine and codeine, as well as semi-synthetic and synthetic prescription drugs commonly prescribed to treat pain, including hydrocodone (Vicodin) and oxycodone (OxyContin).

## HOW HAVE OPIOIDS HISTORICALLY BEEN REGULATED?

In 1860, Pennsylvania became the first state to pass a law related to opioid use, which prohibited the sale of morphine in the state. Other states implemented similar laws to discourage recreational drug use by threatening to impose punishment. As more regulations passed federally and locally, the street prices of drugs began to rise.

National drug policy has historically been politicized, generally resulting in criminal punishment for drug users. The Controlled Substances Act of 1970 was intended to combat the black market and organized crime by imposing minimum sentencing, firmly shifting the emphasis of drug policy to criminal liability and increasing the role of law enforcement. A “war on drugs” was declared by President Nixon in 1971. The [Narcotic Addict Treatment Act](#) of 1974 eased restrictions on prescribing to drug users and attempted to increase treatment options. Despite the passage of the [Drug Addiction Treatment Act of 2000](#) and related attempts to shift emphasis to prevention and treatment, drug policy continued to focus on criminal liability into the 2000s. Gradually, regulation of opioid use for chronic pain management relaxed, leading to a shift in drug policy from curbing illicit drug use to reducing misuse of prescription drugs.

## HOW ARE OPIOIDS REGULATED TODAY?

Drug overdose deaths are the leading cause of injury resulting in death in the country. In 2017, [more than 70,000 people died](#) due to opioid related overdoses. The current epidemic is the [worst drug crisis](#) in American history. While recreational use of opium has always existed in the United States, today’s epidemic largely involves addiction to, misuse and diversion of prescription opioids. Although illicit opioids produce the same effects, many studies indicate that [abuse of prescription opioids may lead to illicit drug use](#).

The federal government and nearly all states have taken steps to mitigate the epidemic by implementing policies and programs intended to prevent opioid dependence, over-prescription and misuse; to increase data collection and quality; to improve public safety; and to facilitate treatment and recovery. Many agencies at the federal, state, and local levels have amended their prescribing and dispensing guidelines to curb unnecessary opioid prescriptions. Significant efforts have been made to develop resources to combat the opioid epidemic, but their effectiveness relies upon an understanding of their functions and limitations. Further research into key areas of concern, coupled with a thorough comprehension of the impact of historic policy, will pave the way for more effective legislation and policies moving forward.