

More people are dying from overdosing on prescription opioids

By [Kate Aubusson](#)

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Talking points

- 1,045 Australians died from opioid overdoses in 2016
- The rate of opioid induced deaths almost doubled in ten years
- Pharmaceutical opioids were involved in three quarters of all drug deaths.
- Almost 500 people died from overdosing on natural and semi-synthetic opioids such as morphine, oxycodone and codeine (3.1 deaths per 100,000 people).
- 214 deaths were caused by synthetic opioids such as fentanyl, tramadol and pethidine.

Rising numbers of Australians are dying from accidentally overdosing on prescription drugs morphine, codeine, oxycodone and fentanyl, the latest drug deaths data shows.

Australia has so far been spared the magnitude of the opioid "epidemic" in the US and its emerging fentanyl crisis, but drug experts were closely monitoring the creeping death rates linked to the synthetic drug.

At the centre of the US opioid crisis is a painkiller responsible for more deaths per year than heroin, and there are signs a similar crisis may emerge in Australia.

A total of 1045 people from 15 to 64 years old died from opioid overdoses in Australia in 2016, according to the report released on Monday by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC).

The rate of opioid induced deaths almost doubled in 10 years, from 3.8 to 6.6 deaths per 100,000 Australians between 2007 and 2016.

More than three-quarters of all drug deaths involved pharmaceutical opioids.

The prescription drugs alone accounted for 65 per cent of these deaths (679 people). Another 11 per cent were due to pharmaceutical opioids mixed with heroin (111 deaths).

Almost 500 people died from overdosing on natural and semi-synthetic opioids such as morphine, oxycodone and codeine (3.1 deaths per 100,000 people).

Deaths linked to synthetic opioids such as fentanyl have also risen. *Photo: Supplied*

Another 214 deaths were caused by synthetic opioids such as fentanyl, tramadol and pethidine, rising from 0.11 per 100,000 people in 2007 (15 deaths) to 1.3 per 100,000 people in 2016.

The total rate of opioid-induced deaths dipped slightly from 1083 deaths in 2015 and was still far below the drug death rates recorded during the heroin “epidemic” of the late 1990s (9.8 per 100,000 people in 1999).

Most of the opioid deaths (85 per cent) were considered accidental, 12 per cent were intentional and 3 per cent were not clear, according to the data collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics from the National Coronial Information System.

The rate of opioid deaths was highest among 35- to 44-year-olds, accounting for 364 deaths (11.3 per 100,000 people) and men accounted for more than two-thirds of all opioid-related deaths (714 men, 331 women).

Australia is eighth out of the top 30 opioid-producing countries in the world, 2012-2014. *Photo: Lancet, July 29, 2017*

Almost half of the people who died from opioid overdoses had mixed the drugs with benzodiazepine (45 per cent), 23 per cent had mixed antidepressants, 14 per cent had been drinking alcohol, 13.5 per cent antipsychotics and 9.9 per cent paracetamol.

The rising rates of opioid deaths paled in comparison to the magnitude of the opioid “epidemic” in the US and Canada where illicit fentanyl appeared to be driving the increase.

Drug overdoses killed [71,568 Americans in 2017](#), about 200 people every day. At least two-thirds were linked to opioids and fentanyl was responsible for almost 30,000 deaths.

Program lead for Drug Trends at UNSW Dr Amy Peacock said there was a lack of strong evidence to suggest Australia was on a similar trajectory.

Pharmaceutical opioids were responsible for the vast majority of drug deaths in Australia in 2016. *Photo: Patrick Sison*

“Although we are carefully monitoring the situation in Australia, at the moment, there is little evidence to suggest that illicit fentanyl is playing a large part in our opioid overdoses,” Dr Peacock said.

In Australia, the vast majority of fentanyl misuse stems from the legally manufactured pharmaceuticals, Dr Peacock said.

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“But we are conscious of being prepared if we do start to see these [illicit] products come into Australia,” she said.

In NSW, opioid-related deaths rose from 3.6 to 6 per 100,000 people between 2007 and 2016. In Victoria, opioid deaths rose from 3.9 to 7.4 per 100,000 over the period, though the 2016 figures were preliminary, Dr Peacock said.

Heroin deaths have also risen, according to the report. There were 357 heroin deaths among Australians aged 15-64 in 2016, 2.2 per 100,000 people up from 0.9 in 2007.

Amphetamines accounted for 105 deaths in 2016, rising from 0.5 to 0.7 per 100,000 people since 2015, the highest since monitoring began.

Fewer than 20 people died from overdosing on cocaine.

Dr Peacock said one of the most effective strategies to prevent opioid overdoses was easing access to opioid substitution therapy and supporting people to stay in treatment.

“We need to ensure this remains a key strategy in Australia,” she said.

People who were close to users should consider carrying and learning how to use naloxone, Dr Peacock said.

“This is available over-the-counter in pharmacies and easily administered to temporarily reverse the effects of an opioid overdose, allowing time to seek medical help.”

In January the federal government enacted an [over-the-counter codeine ban](#) to curb codeine addiction, abuse, and overdoses. The painkillers are now only accessible with a prescription.