

# Bulletin: Ontario hospitals eligible to distribute naloxone through the Ontario Naloxone Program

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## **Background: Urgent need for take-home naloxone distribution in emergency departments/urgent care centres**

Patients at high risk for opioid overdose should routinely be given a naloxone kit when discharged from an emergency department/urgent care centre (ED/UCC). In a study of 1,257 people who experienced one or more opioid overdoses in Simcoe Muskoka, Ontario, 69% had visited the ED at least once in the year prior to the overdose; 36% had visited three or more times.<sup>1</sup> Patients who present to the ED with an opioid overdose are at very high risk of death in subsequent months. In a retrospective cohort study of 6140 people who were seen in an Ontario ED for a non-fatal overdose, the risk of death in the year following the overdose was 5.3% (1). A study from BC demonstrated similar results (2).

**The critical role of the ED/UCC.** Every opportunity to increase access to naloxone is important given current rates of opioid overdoses. Even though naloxone kits are available in community pharmacies and programs (e.g. harm reduction and addiction services), there is opportunity to increase access to naloxone for hospital patients at high risk for opioid overdose upon discharge. In a convenience sample of 165 patients who attended an ED in Baltimore, only 57.6% had a take-home naloxone kit, even though most were aware of where to obtain one. Of the 42 patients who were treated in the ED for an overdose, only 35.5% had a take-home naloxone (THN) kit in their possession (3).

**The need for distributing kits from the ED/UCC.** It is insufficient for ED staff to advise the patient to pick up a kit from an outpatient pharmacy. A systematic review concluded that for THN distribution programs to be effective, kits must be given directly to the patient prior to discharge from the ED (4). In one Boston ED, standing orders allowed any staff member to give a THN kit to a patient or family member. The staff strongly supported the policy (5), and they also welcomed being able to give the kit to a family member. One staff member stated: “If it’s not in their hand walking out the door, if they need it, they got too many other things on their plate to go worry about .... So unless you can hand it to people, I would bet that the follow through is low.”

EDs with THN distribution programs report a high proportion of patients accept the kits (6), (7), (8), (9), (10). In a survey of patients offered THN kits at St Paul’s Hospital in Vancouver (11) only 62 of 247 patients offered THN in the ED declined.

## **THN in the Ontario Context: What THN support is available**

The Ontario Naloxone Program (ONP) is overseen by the Ministry of Health’s AIDS and Hepatitis C Programs (the ministry). The ONP provides both injectable and nasal spray naloxone free of charge to individuals at risk of opioid overdose, and their family and friends through participating sites. **Note that the hospital pharmacy is not involved in the distribution of naloxone through the ONP.**

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<sup>1</sup> [Statistics Canada Study-Opioid Overdoses in Simcoe Muskoka 2018-2019](#)

The ministry understands that distributing naloxone kits for emergency purposes through the ONP does not constitute administering, dispensing, or selling, for the purpose of Section 27 of the *Regulated Health Professions Act, 1991 (RHPA)*. As such, no medical directive or delegation is required to distribute naloxone through the ONP to the ONP's eligible population, including to family and friends of at-risk individuals, however, organizations should always speak with their own legal counsel.

### **Hospital inpatient units (including RAAMs) can also obtain naloxone through the ONP**

In July 2020, the ONP implemented an Expanded Access Program, which allows access to naloxone for eligible hospital inpatient units, including RAAM clinics located in hospitals. To obtain kits, the hospital's local PHU must apply to the ONP on behalf of the site. The PHU must provide the ONP with the following information:

- Estimated number of kits the inpatient unit(s) will require per month
- How the inpatient unit(s) will identify the target population (i.e. patients at risk for opioid overdose, their family and friends).
- The gap in access to naloxone that the inpatient unit(s) will fill (i.e. does the hospital care for significant numbers of patients at risk of opioid overdose).

As of March 2022, 102 out of Ontario's 178 ED/UCCs have enrolled in the ONP. Two hundred and eighty nasal spray and injectable kits were distributed from these participating hospitals per month in the middle of 2021. However, in January 2021 alone, there were 1500 ED visits and 180 hospitalizations for opioid overdose documented in Ontario.<sup>2</sup> And, likely, the monthly number of opioid-related ED visits is far greater, as patients who use opioids visit the ED/UCC for other reasons besides overdose, including infection, trauma, withdrawal, and mental health reasons. This means that only a small minority of eligible ED/UCC patients received a kit.

### **Enrolling, ordering, reporting and training THN**

Public Health Units (PHUs) act as naloxone distribution hubs for a number of eligible sites, including hospitals. **EDs/UCCs and inpatient units must contact their local public health to initiate enrollment in the ONP.** Once an ED/UCC or inpatient unit has been approved by the ONP, an agreement will be signed between the PHU and the hospital, and the hospital will coordinate with the PHU to receive monthly shipments of naloxone. The hospital will be required to report on the number of kits distributed, number of individuals trained, and narrative questions about drug trends in the community, and a need for naloxone in the community that is not being filled, if any.

Additionally, hospitals are to provide training for staff on how to instruct patients and friends/family about naloxone use and are encouraged to set up a training program to this end. They are also encouraged to use educational materials for patients and staff. Hospitals may contact their PHU for additional training support.

**Contact information:** If you have any questions, contact your [local PHU](#) and indicate your interest in distributing naloxone as participants in the ONP. For more information about the Ontario Naloxone Program visit: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/get-naloxone-kits-free>.

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<sup>2</sup> [Interactive Opioid Tool \(Updated March 7 2022\)](#). Public Health Ontario.

## References

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