

street methadone



What is “street methadone”?

Street methadone is methadone sold or given to someone it was not prescribed for.

Methadone is a powerful medication that is part of a group of drugs called opioids. Other examples of opioids include morphine, oxycodone and heroin. When methadone is prescribed by a doctor to treat opioid addiction, it stops opioid withdrawal for a full day. A person who does not have to worry about withdrawal has more time to do things like go to school or work.

When methadone is sold or given to someone it is not prescribed for, it is very dangerous.

What makes methadone so dangerous?

Drugs like heroin, crack and even nicotine work quickly, but the effects don't last long. The effects of methadone, on the other hand, come on very slowly when swallowed. It takes hours to reach its full effect—and 24 hours or more to wear off. Like heroin, oxycodone and other opioids, too much methadone can make you go to sleep and stop breathing. The risk of overdose with methadone is especially dangerous if you:

- take someone else's full dose at once—everyone handles methadone differently, and one person's dose can kill another person
- take a little bit and then take more later, trying to get high—not understanding that an overdose can happen many hours later
- top methadone up with other drugs to feel high—then, because methadone acts slowly and lasts a long time, you might fall asleep, overdose and die.

You can die by taking street methadone by itself—but it is especially dangerous to take it with other opioids, alcohol or other sedating drugs like Gravol and benzodiazepines (e.g., Xanax, Ativan, Valium).

Where does street methadone come from?

Some people who are prescribed methadone are allowed to take their medication home. These doses are called “carries.” Street methadone may come from people who sell or give away their carries.

If street methadone is often diluted, doesn't that make it safer?

People who sell their methadone often try to make more money by “cutting” (further diluting) their methadone with water or juice. No matter what the label says, you never know how much you are taking.

Why is selling your methadone dangerous?

If you sell methadone you are prescribed, you also risk overdosing. This may sound strange, but there is a reason for this. If you skip doses, your body is no longer used to your full dose. Then if you ever have to take your full dose observed, even for a few days—for example if you are in the hospital or in jail, or you lose your carry privileges—you can overdose.

Why is street methadone illegal?

Because methadone is dangerous to anyone it is not prescribed to, giving away or selling methadone is illegal. If someone dies after you give or sell your methadone to him or her, you can be held criminally responsible for the death.

Why do people use street methadone?

Some people use street methadone because they are curious about what it feels like. But because they are not used to taking the drug, they can die after taking even a small amount.

Others use methadone because they want a strong painkiller. But if you need help with pain, it is much better to talk to a doctor than to take street medications, including methadone.

Some people use street methadone to avoid withdrawal when coming off opioid drugs, such as heroin or oxycodone. Methadone can help with withdrawal, but using it without a doctor's help can kill you. If you think that you need to take methadone, call one of the numbers under “Where can I get help with drugs?”

How to reduce harm when using street methadone

Don't use street methadone by yourself. Tell someone what you are doing and what you took, and have the person keep an eye on you. Remember, the effects will last for hours, so you need someone around for quite a while.

If you think you have taken too much, throwing up will *not* help you. Methadone is absorbed by the body in about 15 minutes, even if you don't feel the effects for hours.

Also, if you vomit your dose, don't take more methadone. A large amount can already be in the body, and taking more may lead to an overdose.

If you suspect an overdose, get medical help immediately.

Keep methadone in a locked box and away from children. Even a small amount can kill a child. Children may mistake it for juice.

If you feel down or depressed after using, and think you might harm yourself, get help immediately.

What does a methadone overdose look like?

When people overdose on methadone they slowly become sleepy, and it is hard to wake them. Their breathing becomes slow and shallow, they may snore, and they may pass out.

If someone overdoses on methadone, he or she needs specific drugs and medical care to reverse the overdose. No amount of coffee, cold showers or “walking them around” will help.

Get medical help right away!

If you use opioid drugs, it's a good idea to keep a naloxone kit on hand for friends or family to administer in an emergency. Naloxone can reduce the effects of overdose temporarily and allow time for medical help to arrive. Ask your doctor, pharmacist or public health unit where you can get a naloxone kit.

Methadone overdoses need to be treated at a hospital. If an overdose is not treated, the person can die or have brain damage.

Where can I get help with drugs?

ConnexOntario Drug and Alcohol Helpline:
1 800 565-8603

Access CAMH: Call 416 535-8501
and select option 2

MAARS (Metro Addiction Assessment Referral Service):
416 599-1448 (in Toronto)

The Works: 416 392-0520
(a harm reduction service in Toronto)

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