

US: Heroin an urgent 'public health crisis'

10 March 2014, by Eric Tucker

U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder on Monday called an increase in heroin-related deaths an "urgent and growing public health crisis" and said first responders should carry with them a drug that can reverse the effects of an overdose.

The video message posted on the Justice Department's website reflects the federal government's concern about the growing prevalence of heroin and prescription painkillers. The number of [overdose deaths](#) involving heroin increased by 45 percent between 2006 and 2010, according to White House Office of National Drug Control Policy.

"Addiction to heroin and other opiates, including certain prescription pain-killers, is impacting the lives of Americans in every state, in every region, and from every background and walk of life—and all too often, with deadly results," Holder said in the message.

His public support for an antidote that could be used to rescue overdosing drug users mirrors the position of the White House drug policy office, which has also urged all first responders to have the medication on hand. At least 17 states and the Washington, D.C.—allow naloxone—commonly known by the brand name Narcan—to be distributed to the public, and bills are pending in some states to increase access to it.

Advocates say Narcan, which comes in a spray and injectable form, has the potential to save many lives if administered within a certain window. But critics fear that making the antidote too accessible could encourage drug use.

Holder said law enforcement is combatting the overdose problem, including by cutting off the supply chain that illicitly furnishes [prescription painkillers](#) to drug addicts. But he said more work is needed to prevent and treat drug addiction.

"Confronting this crisis will require a combination of enforcement and treatment. The Justice

Department is committed to both," he said.

Bill Piper, director of national affairs for the Drug Policy Alliance, a group that advocates against what it sees as "the excesses" of the war on drugs, said in addition to promoting broader access to Narcan, the Justice Department should also back better education about [heroin abuse](#) and promote "Good Samaritan" laws that protect from prosecution individuals who call police to report an overdose.

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APA citation: US: Heroin an urgent 'public health crisis' (2014, March 10) retrieved 6 November 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-03-heroin-urgent-health-crisis.html>

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