



Frequently asked questions about naloxone: Access and Barriers

Do all Canadians have access to naloxone?

All Canadians have access to naloxone, in theory. Canadian provinces vary with respect to pharmacy naloxone programs. Both IN and IM naloxone are freely available (paid for by government) in Ontario, Quebec and the NWT, while other provinces only provide IM naloxone for free (So et al., 2020). Even when naloxone is provided to the public for free, access varies. For example, only half of all pharmacies in Ontario dispensed naloxone in 2018 and a third of the kits dispensed were from pharmacies in large urban centers (Choremis et al., 2019; Cressman et al., 2017).

Even with the expansion of eligible populations for a naloxone kit, certain groups including patients with prescribed opioids are still less likely to be offered naloxone (Choremis et al., 2019). Even patients taking high-dose opioids or receiving opioid agonist therapy are not routinely offered naloxone. With the rising number of opioid-associated deaths and disparities in access, data suggests that Canadians at risk of an opioid associated overdose do not have adequate access to naloxone, and there is more room for optimization of naloxone distribution.

What are the barriers to expanding pharmacy-based naloxone distribution?

The most common barrier faced by both pharmacists and patients is stigma (Cid et al., 2021). In surveys, members of the public report feeling hesitant to ask for a naloxone kit at a pharmacy due to a fear of being labelled as an “addict” or being treated negatively by the pharmacy team for having a history of naloxone on their health record (Green et al., 2017). To overcome this barrier, pharmacies can provide non-verbal communication techniques like a pamphlet that a patient can bring to the counter to signal that they want a naloxone kit as well the pharmacy can proactively offer a naloxone kit to all patients (Cid et al., 2021). Pharmacists also worry about offending patients and struggle to know how to bring up the topic of naloxone (Green et al., 2017; Olsen et al., 2019). One way to combat this barrier is through following the national consensus guidelines for pharmacists to offer a naloxone kit to every patient with an opioid prescription (Tsuyuki et al., 2020). The normalization of dispensing and offering naloxone to all, can help to break barriers in pharmacist hesitancy as well as patient stigma (Antoniou et al., 2021).