

Background for the HEALing Communities Study

Every day more than 130 people in the United States die of an overdose from prescription opioids, heroin, or fentanyl. Opioid overdoses and opioid use disorder (OUD) are now a national epidemic that affects public health and social and economic welfare. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the overall costs of health care, lost productivity, OUD treatment, and criminal justice involvement caused by prescription opioid misuse in the United States is close to \$79 billion per year.

The National Survey on Drug Use and Health—which provides up-to-date information on tobacco, alcohol, and drug use, and mental health and other health-related issues in the United States—found that about 2.1 million Americans have OUD. Yet, fewer than one in five of these individuals get treatment in any given year.

One reason for the opioid crisis is that people who could benefit from prevention and treatment do not get the care and services they need. There are lots of proven ways to help people with OUD, but often they're not being used in all the places and in the ways that are most helpful.

Consequently, we need to better understand what communities can do to combat the opioid overdose epidemic. This is why the National Institutes of Health began the [HEAL \(Helping to End Addiction Long-termSM\) Initiative](#). HEAL is a large effort to find scientific solutions to stop the opioid overdose epidemic.

One project under HEAL is the HEALing Communities Study, which was started by the National Institute on Drug Abuse along with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Here are some answers to frequently asked questions about the HEALing Communities Study.

1. What is the purpose of the HEALing Communities Study?

This study will test how different proven approaches to preventing opioid overdose deaths work together. It will look at prevention, overdose response, and treatment with medications across different health care, criminal justice, and community-based settings. And it will focus on places most impacted by the opioid crisis, such as communities with more opioid overdose deaths compared with other communities.

The study aims to:

- Reduce opioid-related overdose deaths by 40%
- Increase the number of people who have naloxone, a drug that saves lives by reversing an opioid overdose

- Expand use of medications for OUD such as buprenorphine (brand names include Bunavail, Suboxone, and Zubsolv), methadone, and naltrexone (brand names include ReVia, Depade, and Vivitrol)
- Reduce high-risk opioid prescribing

The study also will look at what's needed to help a community start and continue a successful fight against its opioid overdose epidemic and if the money spent to do this helps save dollars in other ways.

2. Who is participating in the HEALing Communities Study?

This study is supported by the National Institute on Drug Abuse along with SAMHSA.

This is a big effort with scientific staff from both agencies and four academic institutions leading the effort in their states:

- University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY
- Boston Medical Center, Boston, MA
- Columbia University, New York City, NY
- The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH

Throughout Kentucky, Massachusetts, New York, and Ohio, 67 communities will be taking part in the study. Lots of groups will be involved, including:

- Local organizations
- Academic and government partners
- Community health centers
- Law enforcement
- Jails and prisons
- Health departments
- People who provide treatment for OUD
- Individuals and families impacted directly by the opioid crisis

All these community partners will be able to share their ideas and feedback through local community coalitions and a Community Advisory Board in each state.

Each of the four research sites will collect information about their communities over the 4 years of the study (2019–2023). All this information will be sent to the study's Data Coordinating Center at RTI International, a nonprofit research organization in North Carolina. RTI will analyze the data to see if what we're doing works and then share the study findings with others.

3. How were the HEALing Communities connected to the four research sites chosen?

The application process set requirements for choosing the study communities. Each research site had to pick communities within a single state and at least 30% had to be rural communities. Also, only communities where many people are dying from opioid overdoses were picked to take part in the study.

4. How is the HEALing Communities Study different from providing grants for more services to address the opioid overdose epidemic?

This study is a research grant that is designed to answer questions about what works in fighting the opioid crisis and why. Service grants, on the other hand, provide money directly for more drug screening, treatment, and recovery programs.

This study will compare what different communities are doing to reduce opioid overdoses over time to see if new methods work better than what is already in place.

Many scientific methods will be followed to provide high-quality data and information that can be used by other communities to make decisions about how best to address the opioid overdose epidemic in their community.

5. How long will the HEALing Communities Study receive funding and how much funding will be provided?

More than \$350 million will support this 4-year study, with grants awarded to the research sites and the Data Coordinating Center:

- University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY (\$87 million)
- Boston Medical Center, Boston, MA (\$89 million)
- Columbia University, New York City, NY (\$86 million)
- The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH (\$66 million)
- RTI International, Research Triangle Park, NC (\$26 million) is the study's Data Coordinating Center

6. What can we expect to learn from the HEALing Communities Study?

This study will provide valuable information to help communities improve their response to the opioid crisis and reduce opioid overdose deaths. The experiences and results from the study will help us develop a way for communities to work better together to help people with OUD. By combining the results across the four research sites, the study also will be able to find out how much these efforts cost, how much money can be saved overall, and how the results can be used in other communities.

7. What is an evidence-based practice for reducing OUD and opioid overdose deaths?

In the HEALing Communities Study, we define something as an evidence-based practice (EBP) when scientific research or tests have found it to work. A practice needs to meet strict standards to be called an EBP. Some examples of EBPs for reducing OUD are using approved medications to treat people with OUD and using a drug called naloxone to reverse an opioid overdose.

8. There is an epidemic of opioid use and overdose deaths in the United States now. Why not give the money to communities to do what we know works rather than spending it on research when we won't know the results for 4 more years?

Unfortunately, experiences across the country show that some communities, especially in smaller and rural towns and counties, have challenges in figuring out what resources they have and how to focus them on EBPs to effectively address the opioid overdose epidemic.

Two key questions the HEALing Communities Study is looking to answer are:

- How can communities come together and work quickly to start new opioid overdose programs?
- What combination of EBPs will lead to the fastest and most effective ways to reduce opioid overdose deaths?

Even though it may take a few years to understand and put together, the results of this study will provide a road map to help local, state, and national decision-makers make the best decisions and spend resources in the best way to combat the opioid overdose epidemic and other substance use disorders.

9. What will each of the HEALing Communities Study research sites do? Do all four sites have the same goal? Or will each site test a slightly different set of services?

The research sites will test a community engagement strategy and a set of proven prevention and treatment practices or EBPs, including:

- Increasing the availability and access of naloxone, a drug that saves lives by reversing an opioid overdose
- Adding or expanding treatment with medications for opioid use disorder (MOUD) in primary care, addiction treatment programs, and criminal justice settings
- Identifying people at high risk for opioid overdose deaths and connecting them with MOUD treatment providers
- Conducting communication campaigns in each community to support the use of EBPs and reduce the stigma of OUD and its treatment

Specific plans will vary according to each community's needs. Our goal is to work with each community and help them choose and apply EBPs that focus on groups at high risk for opioid overdose death.

10. How do you know the HEALing Communities Study is working?

This 4-year study is designed so that one group of communities receives the study intervention immediately (Wave 1) and the other group of communities receives the intervention about 2 years later (Wave 2). Communities will be randomly assigned to Wave 1 or Wave 2. All communities will receive the intervention before the study is completed. By comparing the two groups of communities over time, the researchers can make objective conclusions about the effects of the study.

11. How was the goal of reducing opioid overdose deaths by 40% determined?

We know this is a big goal. But it is needed because so many Americans are dying from opioid overdoses. Setting the bar high helps ensure that this study will have a meaningful impact on individuals, public health, and the health of communities overall.

12. What will happen if the study doesn't reduce opioid overdose deaths by 40%? Does that mean it didn't work?

Although we plan on reaching the 40% goal, even if we fall short the study will provide valuable information about:

- How communities can organize to provide EBPs and treatment services across different settings
- What helps or hurts such a community effort
- What are the costs

13. Can my community participate in the HEALing Communities Study?

The communities that will take part in the study have already been chosen and have agreed to be involved. To ensure the scientific integrity of this research, new communities cannot be added to the study.

Communities that want to address their opioid overdose epidemic can apply for other grants from federal agencies, including the Department of Justice, the Health Resources and Services Administration, and SAMHSA.

14. How are community groups and organizations involved in the HEALing Communities Study?

Each research site is partnering with community-based organizations, including police, fire departments, faith-based organizations, schools, housing, social services, and business and economic developers.

Also, each research site must have a Community Advisory Board made up of representatives from communities involved in the study and other experts to provide recommendations and to help address any problems that might come up during the study.

15. What is the role of families, consumers, and people in recovery in the HEALing Communities Study?

Families, consumers, and people in recovery play an important role in the study. The study is designed to include these key groups in different parts of the project, including participating in the state Community Advisory Boards and the local community coalitions. Input from everyone impacted directly by the opioid overdose epidemic will help us achieve our overall goal.

16. How can I follow the HEALing Communities Study?

Individuals and communities can follow the study and be updated on its progress at the National Institutes of Health HEALing Communities Study (<https://heal.nih.gov/research/research-to-practice/healing-communities>) page and at the HEALing Communities Study website (<https://healingcommunitiesstudy.org>). The study also will be active on several social media sites.

17. Will the HEALing Communities Study address substance misuse other than opioids?

People who use opioids often use other drugs too. Some of these drugs, such as methamphetamine and cocaine, are becoming bigger problems in communities across the country. We'll be watching these and other drugs in the study communities and work with them to decide what to do.

This study focuses specifically on opioids, but the lessons learned and local EBP and treatment systems that are developed can be used to address other drug epidemics that may arise in the future.

18. How will the results of the HEALing Communities study be assessed? And at what points during the project?

The research sites will measure the primary goal of reducing opioid overdose deaths by at least 40%. The final results will be shared at the end of the study in 4 years. However, other types of information—such as lessons learned and study progress—will be available before then.

19. How will the HEALing Communities Study affect the ability of patients with chronic pain to receive prescription opioids?

This study is not intended to change the way prescription opioids are used to treat patients with chronic pain. Those decisions are made by the prescribing health care provider together with the patient. The project will promote the use of safe guidelines for the treatment of chronic pain, such as those developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, professional medical associations, and state medical boards.

20. What funding will communities participating in the HEALing Communities Study receive?

During the application process, the selected research sites described how they planned to include funding that SAMHSA separately awarded to states and local areas for providing EBPs, treatment, and recovery support services.

The research sites also showed how they planned to reduce health coverage payment barriers related to medication for OUD and supporting services—such as behavioral health services—including through their state Medicaid program.

This study will help communities learn what funds are already available and connect them to existing programs and services. Many of these are free or low cost. Although this study is not intended to provide all funding for treatment, funding can be used to assist with gaps in funding and staffing prevention, treatment, and recovery services.

21. What happens when the HEALing Communities Study ends?

This study aims to understand what helps to successfully implement and sustain an integrated EBP and treatment system that can be used broadly in communities across the United States. Consequently, the application process required a plan for longer term sustainability, or maintenance, of the interventions. Each research site and its community will be working toward implementing interventions that will continue past the end of the study.

The study also will provide economic analyses to guide decision-makers in choosing a strategy that produces the greatest impact on reducing opioid overdose deaths in communities.

22. How do I or my family member get to take part in the HEALing Communities Study?

The study is not enrolling individual patients or their families for treatment of OUD.

If you're interested in more information about opioid addiction and treatment, here are some resources:

- **Finding Opioid Treatment**

SAMHSA Opioid Treatment Program Directory

Find opioid treatment programs in a state. <https://dpt2.samhsa.gov/treatment/directory.aspx>

- **Finding Treatment for Substance Use or Mental Health Problems**

SAMHSA Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator

A confidential and anonymous source of information for persons seeking treatment facilities in the United States or U.S. Territories for substance use/addiction or mental health problems. <https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/>

- **Finding Treatment for Opioid Dependence with Buprenorphine**

SAMHSA Buprenorphine Practitioner Locator

Find practitioners authorized to treat opioid dependency with buprenorphine by state. <https://www.samhsa.gov/medication-assisted-treatment/practitioner-program-data/treatment-practitioner-locator>

- **Find Out About Participating in Research Studies**

NIDA Clinical Trial Locator

If you regularly use tobacco or other drugs, such as alcohol, pain pills, cocaine, or marijuana, you may be able to participate in a clinical trial. Clinical trials are research studies with people. They help scientists understand how drug use affects the brain, find new treatments, and better understand drug addiction.

<https://www.drugabuse.gov/research/clinical-research/search>