

The New Jersey Poison Information & Education System — Serving New Jersey Since 1983

NEWS RELEASE

Media to contact:
800-222-1222
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Loperamide Poisoning in New Jersey – A Growing Symptom of the Overdose Epidemic –

(Newark, NJ) - The state's poison control center has recently consulted on several cases of loperamide toxicity, signaling a growing, dangerous trend in New Jersey. Poison Control experts warn of the drug's high potential for abuse, misuse and risk of overdose among people of all ages struggling with substance use disorder; adding to the death toll of the country's opioid epidemic.

Case: A young woman with opioid use disorder starts taking high doses of loperamide to avoid withdrawal. She is found by a friend unresponsive and in cardiac arrest. Although EMS is able to revive her initially, she dies in the hospital from a lethal arrhythmia.

What does an over-the-counter (OTC) anti-diarrhea medicine have to do with the opioid epidemic? The answer is simple – loperamide, sometimes referred to as “PMM” and found in many OTC meds, including Imodium, is actually an opioid. Although the effects do not produce a “high” like traditional opioids (heroin, fentanyl, oxycodone), it does stimulate the brain in the same way at very high doses.

Opioids are a class of drug that include the illicit (illegal) drug heroin, synthetic opioids (i.e. fentanyl or carfentanil) and many prescription (Rx) pain medications/pain killers (i.e. OxyContin or Percocet). Although opioids can be helpful to treat severe pain, they also carry an unacceptably high risk of addiction, dependence, and overdose. Patients with opioid use disorder often struggle with withdrawal symptoms, and may turn to unusual remedies like loperamide to avoid them.

Over-the-counter medicines are inexpensive, readily available online and in retail stores, undetectable on routine drug tests, and can be bought in large quantities at one time. Although some use this product to get high, most use loperamide to self-treat opioid withdrawal symptoms. No matter the reason, what many users don't know is that high doses of this ingredient can lead to fatal heart rhythms and death.

“This is not a typical opioid overdose death, it's a cardiac death,” says Diane Calello, MD, Medical and Executive Director of the NJ Poison Control Center at Rutgers New Jersey Medical School's Department of Emergency Medicine. “Deaths can occur not because the patient stops breathing, but because the patients have cardiac dysrhythmias (irregular heartbeat) and cardiac arrest. Loperamide is much more toxic to the heart than other opioids (heroin, oxycodone, and fentanyl). Consequently, Naloxone (Narcan®), which can be very effective to revive a typical opioid overdose, does not fix or reverse this cardiac toxicity.”

When used according to the labeled directions, loperamide is a safe and effective treatment for diarrhea. However, “loperamide can cause deadly consequences when used in extremely high doses,” says Calello. “If a loved one is struggling with drug addiction, be aware that they may be using this product without understanding the potentially fatal side effects.” The medical literature continues to

report hundreds of cases across the country of adverse effects from near-fatal to deadly consequences from loperamide overdose. Pay close attention to the development of symptoms; call the poison control center, 1-800-222-1222, for information or medical emergencies.

It's important to remember all medicines are drugs, whether they are prescriptions, over-the-counters, or herbal/dietary supplements. They all have the potential to cause serious and even fatal consequences if misused, abused or mixed with other medicines/substances. Poison control centers are a great resource for both the public and healthcare professionals. Keep us at your fingertips; save the Poison Help number (1-800-222-1222) as a contact in your cell phone.

Help is Just a Phone Call Away!

We are social. Join us on Facebook ([@NJPIES](#)) and Twitter ([@NJPoisonCenter](#)) for breaking news, safety tips, trivia questions, etc.

Real People. Real Answers.

Available for Media Interviews

Diane P. Calello, MD, Executive and Medical Director, New Jersey Poison Information and Education System (NJPIES)
Bruce Ruck, Pharm.D., Director of Drug Information and Professional Education, New Jersey Poison Information and Education System (NJPIES)

About NJPIES

Chartered in 1983, the New Jersey Poison Information & Education System (NJPIES) is New Jersey's only poison control center. Medical professionals such as physicians, registered nurses and pharmacists offer free consultation through hotline services (telephone, text and chat) regarding poison emergencies and provide information on poison prevention, drugs, food poisoning, animal bites and more. In addition, it tracks incidences of adverse reactions to food, drugs and vaccines in order to monitor potential public health issues and provide data to the New Jersey Department of Health, U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. NJPIES' confidential services are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, every day of the year. When needed, NJPIES responds to other emergent health issues by expanding hotline services.

NJPIES is designated as the state's regional poison control center by the New Jersey Department of Health and the American Association of Poison Control Centers. It is a division of the Department of Emergency Medicine of Rutgers New Jersey Medical School. NJPIES has a state-of-the-art center located at Rutgers Health Sciences in Newark. NJPIES is funded, in part, by the NJ Department of Health, NJ Hospitals and the United States Department of Health and Human Services.

New Jersey residents should save the Poison Help number, 1-800-222-1222, in their mobile phones and post the number somewhere visible in their home. NJPIES is also available via text [8002221222@njpies.org](sms:8002221222@njpies.org) and chat www.njpies.org.
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Rutgers Biomedical and Health Sciences (RBHS) is the health care education, research, and clinical division of Rutgers University, comprising nine schools and their attendant faculty practices, centers, institutes and clinics; New Jersey's leading comprehensive cancer care center; and New Jersey's largest behavioral health care network.

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