

# EXCEEDING THE DOSE

Most people associate drug overdoses with attempts at suicide or the fatalities and near fatalities brought on by abuse of street drugs. However, drug overdoses can also occur among people who deliberately or inadvertently exceed the stated dose of a drug that has been prescribed for them by their doctor.

A single extra dose of most drugs is unlikely to be a cause for concern, although accidental overdoses can create anxiety in the individual and his or her family, and may cause overdose symptoms, which can appear in a variety of different forms.

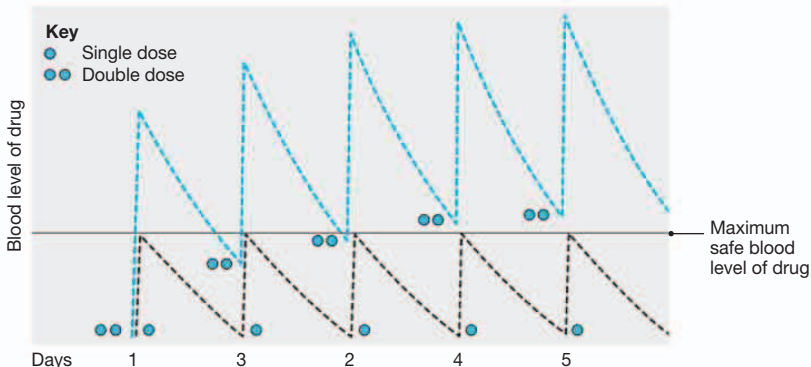
Overdose of some drugs, however, is potentially dangerous even when the dose has been exceeded by only a small amount. Each of the drug profiles in Part 3 gives detailed information on the consequences of exceeding the dose, symptoms to look out for, and what to do. Each drug has an overdose danger rating of low, medium, or high, which are described fully on p.146.

## Taking an extra dose

People sometimes exceed the stated dose in the mistaken belief that by increasing dosage they will obtain more immediate action or a more effective

## Effects of repeated overdose

Too high a dose of a drug over an extended period may lead to a build-up of high levels of the drug in the body, especially if liver or kidney function is reduced.



cure. This action is a particular risk with tolerance-inducing drugs (see Drug tolerance and dependence, p.23). Others exceed their dose accidentally, by miscalculating the amount or forgetting that the dose has already been taken.

Taking extra doses is often a problem in the elderly, who may repeat their dose through forgetfulness or confusion. This is

a special risk with medicines that cause drowsiness (see also p.22).

In some cases, especially when liver or kidney function deteriorates, the drug builds up in the blood because the body cannot break down and excrete the extra dose quickly enough, so that symptoms of poisoning may result. Symptoms of excessive intake may not be apparent for many days.

## When and how to get help

If you are not sure whether or not you have taken your medicine, think back and check again. If you honestly cannot remember, assume that you have missed the dose and follow the advice given in the individual drug profiles in Part 3 of this book. If you cannot find your drug, consult your doctor. Make a note to use some system in the future which will help you remember to take your medicine.

If you are looking after an elderly person on regular drug treatment who suddenly develops unusual symptoms such as confusion, drowsiness, or unsteadiness, consider the possibility of an inadvertent drug overdose and consult the doctor as soon as possible.

## Deliberate overdose

While many cases of drug overdose are accidental or the result of a mistaken belief that increasing the dose will enhance the benefits of drug treatment, sometimes an excessive amount of a drug is taken with the intention of causing harm or even as a suicide attempt. Whether or not you think a dangerous amount of a drug has been taken, deliberate overdoses of this kind should always be brought to the attention of your doctor. Not only is it necessary to ensure that no physical harm has occurred as a result of the overdose, but the psychological condition of a person who takes such action may indicate the need for additional medical help, especially when the person is elderly, has a physical illness, or is known to suffer from depression.

## THE EFFECT OF DRUG OVERDOSE ON THE BODY

The effect of drug overdose on the body depends on the type of drug involved. Some drugs produce an exaggeration of the desired effect, for instance overdose of tranquilizers

leads to unconsciousness. With many drugs, the toxic overdose effects are unrelated to the action or side effects of the drug when it is taken in normal doses.

**Heart and circulation**  
Some anti-depressants, cause severe, and possibly fatal, arrhythmias in overdose.

**Liver**  
Fatal liver damage can occur with as few as 20 tablets of paracetamol. Treatment can prevent damage but must be given within 12 hours of taking the drug.

**Stomach and intestines**  
Iron overdose causes bleeding in the digestive tract. An overdose of NSAIDs may cause ulceration of the stomach and intestines.

**Brain**  
Depression of the respiratory centre in the brain is common with overdose of barbiturates and tranquilizers. Aspirin in overdose can result in seizures.

**Kidney**  
An overdose of NSAIDs, particularly in people who have impaired kidney function, can result in kidney failure.