



The opioid crisis:

How we're helping curb misuse with support for prescribers, pharmacists, members and our communities



Over 81,000 Americans died from opioid overdoses in the 12 months ending in May 2020, according to the **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**. Death rates were already on the rise in 2019 and now have accelerated due to the pandemic.

An article in **Medical Care** reports that opioid addiction affects thousands of lives and costs more than \$78.5 billion a year in the U.S. Employers pay, on average, \$1.71 per member per month in health care expenses and loss of work due to opioid misuse, a finding in **Applied Health Economics and Health Policy**. For a 500-person employer, that's more than \$10,000 a year.

From medication policy and management to community support and legislative advocacy, we use a multifaceted approach to address this multidimensional problem. As a result, we've lowered overall opioid use, strengthened provider partnerships and generated greater public awareness of this continuing public health crisis.

Over the past five years, Regence has reduced opioid prescriptions by 51% through programs intended to curb inappropriate opioid use, while supporting appropriate use for members who benefit from opioid treatment.

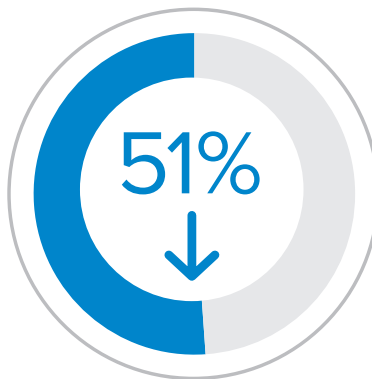
Our program includes a range of utilization management tools and outreach efforts that use risk-stratification methods to proactively identify and mitigate substance use disorder and overdose risk. These methods include using medical and pharmacy claims data as well as real-time medical records. Individuals with substance use disorders present in many ways and may have varying medical comorbidities. We strive to identify those individuals and match them with the services and help they need.

Lowering overall opioid use



From 2015 to 2020, our approach yielded the following results:*

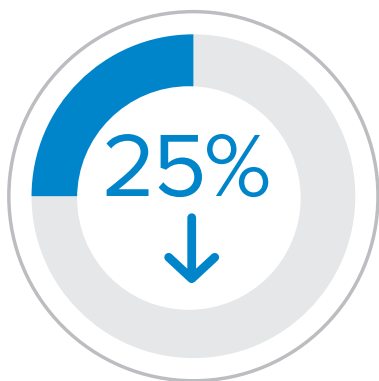
*Based on Regence internal pharmacy analysis, 2020



reduction in overall opioid prescriptions

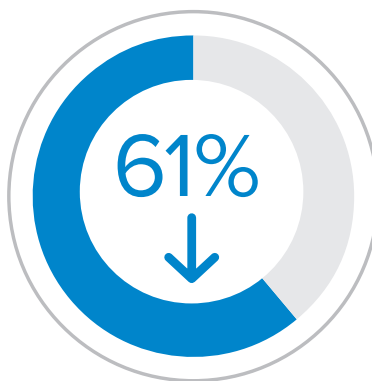


reduction in people using opioids for the first time



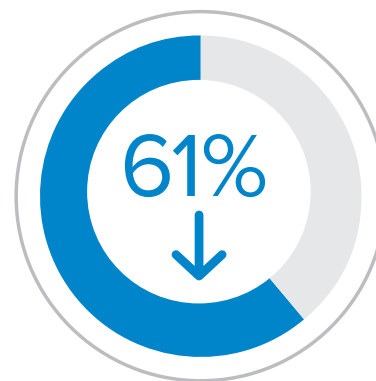
reduction in average days' supply of new opioid prescriptions

(opioid prescriptions dropped by a 2-day supply on average)



reduction in use of long-acting opioids

(long-acting opioids are associated with a higher risk for adverse events)



reduction in use of opioids greater than 90 morphine equivalents for more than 30 days

(a high cumulative dose of opioids that is associated with a higher risk of overdose and death)

Empowering prescribers with information to support patients

Intervention at the time of prescribing is the most effective means of ensuring appropriate use. While opioids are effective for pain management, prescribers must consider several factors to ensure their patients use them properly. Empowering prescribers with the resources and data they need to make informed decisions is critical. Regence has accomplished this by providing prescribers with:

- Data analysis that reveals opportunities for more informed clinical decision-making when prescribing opioids, resulting in better patient outcomes
- A prescriber toolkit that includes resources on opioid and pain management guidelines
- Newsletter articles to educate prescribers about available resources, Regence's opioid-related policy changes and changes to state-specific prescribing laws

Employing utilization management strategies to limit abuse

A pharmacist is often the last health care provider a member will interact with before taking a medication. For this reason, Regence has given our network of pharmacists a variety of tools that alert them to potentially unsafe opioid use so they may act before dispensing the medication. We accomplished this through utilization management strategies that encourage safer dispensing of opiates. Strategies include:

- Alerting pharmacists of potential inappropriate use of opioids, including dangerous combinations and very high doses that put patients at risk for adverse outcomes
- Aligning our medication policies with national and regional safety opioid guidelines
- Adding a seven-day supply limit to opioid prescriptions for patients identified as newly starting on an opioid

Additionally, Regence removed barriers to accessing treatments used to reverse opioid overdose and those that help treat substance use disorder, known as medication-assisted therapy (MAT).

Educating our members and community

We believe investing in member and community education is key to curbing opioid misuse. To that end, we have:

- Developed an educational **website** about opioids that includes resources for our members.
- Created a **conversation guide** for members to use with their providers when discussing pain management options and safe usage.
- Championed the **Drug Enforcement Agency's National Prescription Drug Take Back Days** to encourage safe disposal of unused medications.

We have made great strides in reducing opioid prescription use by more than half within just five years, but our work is far from done. We continue our efforts to identify new programs to help our members. In mid-March, Boulder Care, a virtual care service that offers medication-assisted therapy for opioid and alcohol use disorder, was added to our networks for all states and all plans. This partnership will provide our members greater access to addiction treatment.

There is no single solution to this epidemic and no one player who can tip the scales. Solving this crisis will require more effective approaches to pain management, more careful and informed opioid prescribing, consistent and comprehensive monitoring of opioid use, stronger partnerships with providers and the community, and greater access to overdose and addiction treatment. Regence remains committed, supporting our members and advocating for holistic solutions to bring this epidemic to an end.

