Accessibility of Over-the-Counter Naloxone in Providence, RI, Retail Pharmacies

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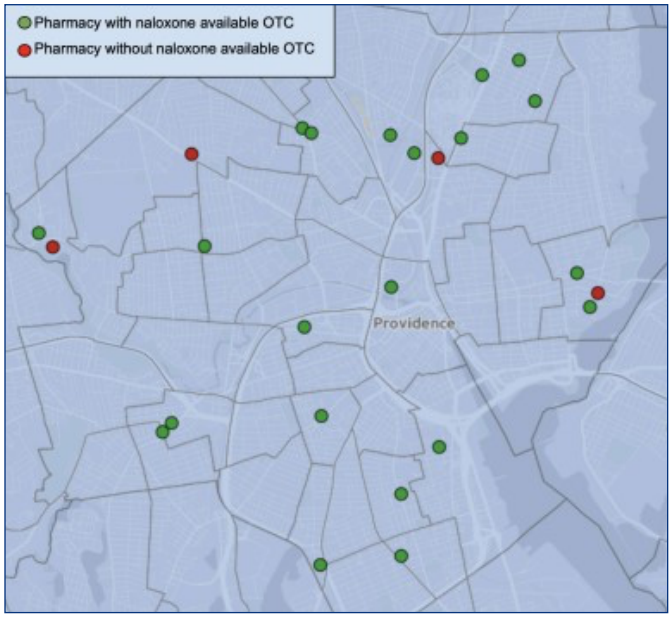
Annually, over 100,000 Americans die from drug overdoses —most involving opioids.[1]

Naloxone, a life-saving opioid overdose-reversal medication, was approved by the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for sale without a prescription in 2023.[2] To evaluate the impact of this ruling, we assessed the availability of over-the-counter (OTC) naloxone in all retail pharmacies in Providence, Rhode Island. Providence is the state's largest city and has an overdose death rate significantly higher than the state average.[3] Given that Providence has been ranked among cities with the highest income inequality in the U.S., an analysis of naloxone availability at pharmacies in different neighborhoods is particularly relevant.[4]

During the summer of 2024, our study team visited all 25 retail pharmacies in Providence and attempted to buy naloxone without a prescription. We recorded availability, price, naloxone location within the store, and what kind of help employees offered. Naloxone was available OTC at 21 of 25 pharmacies (84%), suggesting that the FDA's approval has meaningfully expanded access [**Figure 1**]. CVS and Walgreens were more reliable in price and availability, while independent pharmacies were inconsistent. The average cost of naloxone was $49.19 pre-tax, ranging from $34.99 to $104.87, which is a substantial cost barrier. Chain pharmacies ranged from $34.99 to $44.99.

While expensive, naloxone was widely available OTC, which is helpful for people wishing to purchase anonymously (as there is no pharmacy record or bill). Pharmacists were knowledgeable and supportive, often providing instructions for use of naloxone, emphasizing its life-saving importance, and mentioning local community-based free naloxone resources. However, barriers remain. In over half of the pharmacies, naloxone was kept behind the front counter, requiring customers to ask for it. In practice, this may discourage purchase due to stigma or confusion. At 35% of chain pharmacies, front-of-store staff did not know what naloxone was or where it was located. Some provided inaccurate information or questioned the buyer's motivation—one asked if the buyer was "overdosing right now." Stigma may remain a barrier to harm reduction and presents an opportunity for ongoing staff training to ensure a stigma-free environment. In many stores, the first employees who customers interact with are not pharmacists. If those employees do not know naloxone is available—or treat its purchase suspiciously—true customer access may be low.

Figure 1. Availability of OTC naloxone in Providence, RI, pharmacies
Green dots represent retail pharmacies where the study team member was able to purchase naloxone without a prescription. Red dots represent retail pharmacies where the study team member was unable to purchase naloxone without a prescription. Census tracts, according to 2020 census data, are overlaid in grey lines.



In Providence, OTC naloxone is widely available across the city. In addition to pharmacies, community organizations provide free naloxone and training on its use. Prevent Overdose RI is a state initiative to increase both education about and access to naloxone—a resource that can be shared with customers by pharmacy staff.[5] In our study, we found that retail pharmacists are often already making these recommendations. Finally, naloxone saves lives, but it is not a cure for the opioid epidemic. True progress requires a harm-reduction network that includes integrated treatment, recovery, and educational services, in addition to overdose prevention. Future work may focus more on how retail pharmacies can be further integrated with other state and city-wide overdose prevention services.

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